

アクセル・ワールド3

ゆうやみ りやくだつしゃ
—夕闇の略奪者—

「ゲームオーバーです、有田先輩……いえ、シルバー・クロウ」

学内一の美少女・黒雪姫との出会いによって人生が一変した少年、ハルユキ。デブでいじめられっ子だった彼も、立派な《騎士》として成長していた。

季節は春。二年生となったハルユキたちの前に、奇妙な新生が現れる。《ブレイン・バースト》のマッチングリストに現れず、しかし日常では《ブレイン・バースト》を巧みに使いこなす謎の一年生。

黒雪姫が修学旅行で不在の中、《ダスク・テイカー》と呼ばれる歪なデュエル・アバターを出現させた一年生は、圧倒的な力でハルユキから『大切なもの』を奪っていく。再び中学内格差最底辺に堕ちたハルユキ。絶体絶命の彼がその時とった行動とは……!!



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電撃文庫

Ⓜ

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かわはら れき
川原 礫

加速は無理でも減速はいずれできると思うんですよ。人工冬眠とかで。そしたらあの小説やあの漫画が完結してる時代に行けるわけですよ！ と思ったら作者さま方もみんな冬眠していたというオチで！

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド1 —黒雪姫の帰還—

アクセル・ワールド2 —紅の暴風姫—

アクセル・ワールド3 —夕闇の略奪者—

ソードアート・オンライン1 —アインラッド—

ソードアート・オンライン2 —アインラッド—

イラスト:HIMA

10月3日生まれ。挿絵は今回が初のイラストレーター。『電撃萌王』小冊子への寄稿を見た文庫編集者が、今回の挿絵依頼をオファーしたことがきっかけ。本業仕事の合間を縫って、ブログやSNSサイトなどでイラストを発表している。

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アクセル・ワールド

03

夕闇の略奪者




川原 礫
イラスト/HIMA
デザイン/ビィビィ



"STAY
RIGHT THERE
AND BE
MY PILLOW
FOR A
WHILE.
IF YOU DO
ANYTHING
PERVERTED
I'LL LET
THAT
ANOMALOCARIS
GNAW
ON YOU"

CHIYURI

HARUYUKI'S
CHILDHOOD FRIEND



"GAME OVER
ARITA-SENPAI,
OR SHOULD
I SAY
SILVER CROW"



"EH.....?"

NOUMI SEIJI

A TRANSFER STUDENT AT
THE TOP OF THE SCHOOL CASTE



HARUYUKI

A YOUNG BOY AT THE
BOTTOM OF HIS SCHOOL'S
SOCIAL CASTE





"I'VE
WANTED
TO MEET
YOU AT
LEAST
ONCE.
I'M
HAPPY
TO HAVE
MET YOU
KARASU-SAN"

SKY
RAKER

A MYSTERIOUS FEMALE PLAYER
WHO LIVES A PEACEFUL LIFE
IN THE ACCELERATED WORLD



"U...UM....
ASH SAID
IT BUT
ARE YOU
THE
PERSON
WHO GOT
CLOSEST
TO THE
SKY
IN THE
ACCELERATED
WORLD..."

ASH
ROLLER

SILVER CROW'S FIRST
OPPONENT AND A PLAYER
HE CAN'T GET AWAY FROM

SILVER
CROW

HARUYUKI'S
DUEL AVATAR

"IT'S BEEN
A WHILE
MASTER"



"HIME,
HOW LONG
ARE YOU
PLANNING
TO STAY
DRESSED
LIKE
THAT?"

"WH-WHAT
ARE YOU
DOING?!"

KUROYUKIHIME

THE BLACK KING
THE STUDENT COUNCIL
VICE PRESIDENT OF UMESATO
MIDDLE SCHOOL AND CONTROLLER
OF BLACK LOTUS.

HARUYUKI

is the...

"Silver Crow"
in the
Accelerated
World.



"Haruyuki Arita"
in the
Real World.



"Pink Pig"
in the
Umesato Junior
High School's
Local Area
Network.



ACCEL WORLD⁰³

Dusk Robber

Kawahara Reki
Illustration / HIMA
Design / Biibii



- Kuroyukihime = The Student Council Vice-President of Umesato Middle School. A well-mannered and intelligent lady. Her background is mired in mystery. Her avatar in school is her self-made program, the "Black Swallowtail Butterfly". Her duel avatar is the Black King, "Black Lotus".
- Haruyuki = Arita Haruyuki. A first-year student in Umesato Middle School. A bullied child with a plump appearance. He's good at games, but an introvert. His avatar in school is the "Pink Pig". His duel avatar is "Silver Crow".
- Chiyuri = Kurashima Chiyuri. A childhood friend of Haruyuki. A meddlesome, lively girl. Her avatar in school is the "Silver Cat".
- Takumu = Mayuzumi Takumu. An acquaintance of Haruyuki and Chiyuri since childhood. Skilled in Kendo. His duel avatar is "Cyan Pile".
- Noumi Seiji = A first-year student who newly entered Umesato Middle School. His background is a mystery, but he uses Brain Burst even in his school life, standing at the top of the middle school caste.

-
- Neuro Linker = A mobile terminal that establishes a wireless quantum connection to the brain, supporting the five senses, such as sight and hearing.
 - School's Local Net = A local area network constructed within Umesato Middle School. Used for taking attendance and lessons, it became a need for students of Umesato Middle School to connect to it.
 - Global Connect = The act of connecting to the Global Net. As connecting to the Global Net is prohibited within Umesato Middle School, the School's Local Net is provided as a replacement.
 - Brain Burst = An application within the Neuro Linker that Kuroyukihime transferred to Haruyuki.
 - Duel Avatar = A virtual body controlled by players when battling in Brain Burst.
 - Legion = Refers to groups formed by several duel avatars, with the aim of expanding their occupied areas and protecting their privileges. Each of the «Seven Kings of Pure Color» are tasked as legion masters.
 - Territory Battle Time = Set to the evening of every Saturday, it's a time period for battles with special rules. Unlike the usual 1 versus 1 fighting matches, battles are conducted as group matches with equal numbers and no level restrictions.
 - Area Control = A privilege granted by the system through exceeding an average win rate of 60% within the Territory Battle Time. While in the controlled territory, it grants privileges such as being able to decline to Battles even when the Neuro Linker is connected to the Global Net.
 - Standard Battle Field = Refers to the field where normal battles (1 versus 1 matches) take place in Brain Burst. Although the specs it possesses are close to that of reality, its system is still at the level of fighting games of the past.
 - Unlimited Neutral Field = A field restricted to duel avatars at level 4 and above, geared towards heavy players. It is designed with a game system different from that of the Standard Battle Field, with a degree of freedom easily comparable to even that of the future's VRMMOs.
 - Enhanced Armament = Refers to items such as weapons and equipment owned by duel avatars. Can be obtained through several methods, such as having it from the start as part of the starting equipment, received from a level up bonus, or bought from the Shop in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Prologue

The largest network called «Global Net», transcended the name Global five years ago. In the Eastern Pacific, a space elevator was built to a stationary orbit space station, that also connected to many bases on the moon, and now anyone who wishes, can dive from their home to the moon's surface in true real time image.

Of course, numerous networks other than that exist. Countries and businesses with their firewall protected large scale Closed Nets, schools and apartments with their Local Nets, or personally operated Private Nets, and many more are built on top of each other. If you could see the internal communication signals flying around, the world would be seen as covered by a thin shining white mesh.

Compared to those, it's very small scale, however for Arita Haruyuki, it's a net that holds a very important meaning, which is occurring in Haruyuki's room right now.

"...Th-Then, connecting, Chiyu."

He announced it in a low voice, and Chiyu, that is Kurashima Chiyuri, answered with a voice that had none of his tension.

"Why are you trying to be pompous. Just do it quickly."

Not understanding other's feeling.

While moaning in his heart, Haruyuki inserted the plug held in his left hand into the Neuro Linker on his neck.

At the same time, two Wired Connection warnings lit up red in the center of his view, then disappeared.

Chiyuri who sat on the bed, from her light purple Neuro Linker, two XSB cables extended from left and right side, one of them connected to Haruyuki who sat on the floor. And the other one, was connected to Taku that is Mayuzumi Takumu who sat on a mesh chair.

This connection situation should not be filled with such tension. No, before that—

"...You don't really need to direct connect with me..."

After he complained, Chiyuri's cat like eyes gave him an once over.

"No. If the copy from Ta-kun fails, I have your promise that the next install will be from Haru. I won't let you get away."

"...Yes."

He nodded, and took a glance to the right, where Takumu returned a wry smile while pushing his frameless glasses up.

Haruyuki, Chiyuri, and Takumu were all born in the same year in this south Kouenji large apartment, that is they had childhood-friends relationship.

The long time old friends played together everyday, sometimes they had silly quarrels, and then made up, which continued till three years ago—when the three of them were 11 years old, Chiyuri and Takumu started going out with each other, so Haruyuki backed off. The result, was that

the equilateral triangle they had till then, one corner moved far away and it became an isosceles triangle.

However last year, with a certain incident's trigger, their relationship was fully reset once, and now half a year later, it continued to be in a delicate state.

For Haruyuki, he wished they would quickly make up. However Takumu who started the incident, still continued to blame himself, and with him not taking any proactive action, the triangle's sides expand and shrink unstably day by day. Just like— right now, the uneven sway of the two cables between the three Neuro Linkers.

"Then, you are ready right, Chi-chan?"

With a soft sound that did not show his inner feelings, Takumu said so.

Chiyuri nodded as her short hair swayed, and her hands held tight above her small knees which peeked out from her skirt.

Takumu also returned the nod, then his long finger moved in midair— he must be manipulating the virtual desktop that only he could see, and while his middle pressed on a file, a slight hesitation showed on his well featured white face.

"...Chi-chan. For the last time, let me again make sure... the «Brain Burst» that I will send you, it is a game but not a game. In exchange for tremendous privilege, pleasure, and thrill, it requires many different kinds of compensation. Someday... you might regret it."

Those words, easily represented Haruyuki's misgivings in his heart.

With the installation of the mysterious game application «Brain Burst», people that became accelerated ability users called «Burst Linkers», can no longer go back to what they were before. Completely captured by the unknown net of the accelerated world, and to keep the rights to connect to that, «Duels» must be repeated forever. That pressure sometimes distorted the personality. The incident in which Takumu placed a backdoor virus in Chiyuri's Neuro Linker and was given a 'friendship break off' announcement for a while, was due to his fear of losing accelerated ability being pushed to the limit.

However, for Chiyuri who was faced with worried looks from left and right, she puffed up her cheeks and said in a sharp voice in return.

"Look here! I want to become that Burst whatever, is not that I want that accelerated ability, nor *that senpai* coming to our home! Ta-kun and Haru being that deep in it is what I can't stand! For a game, if you don't play it with more fun it's no good, I want it so I can clearly teach that to you!"

While he involuntary leaned back, Haruyuki and Takumu looked at each other at the same time and had wry smiles.

"U-Understood, Chi-chan. Then... ready right? Sending."

"Please."

Lifting her sharp jaw up, Chiyuri prompted with her wink.

Towards that face, Takumu slid his finger in midair.

Chiyuri's large eyes locked onto a point in the air. Right now, there should be an installation confirmation dialog open for the application «Brain Burst 2039».

Lifting her right hand from her knees, Chiyuri did not show any sign of hesitation as she used her index finger to poke where the YES button was supposed to be.

"Ah...!?"

Right after, sitting on the bed's edge, the slender body wearing the pink knitwear jerked. Her wide eyes looked left and right. Haruyuki remembered half year ago, the time that he accepted Brain Burst. At the moment he pressed the button, lots of virtual flames erupted in his view.

Those flames, were shown to the person installing the program to check their «acceleration aptitude».

There are two aptitudes required to become a Burst Linker. First, to wear a Neuro Linker since birth, which Chiyuri cleared without any doubt. However the problem is the second one, the brain's reaction speed.

The Neuro Linker communicates with the wearer's brain using wireless quantum signals. But, the flesh and blood organ's, that is the brain's, response rate differs from person to person. Either born with high reaction nerve circuits, or increased through long training, anyway if the Neuro Linker and the brain's response speed is not beyond a certain level, the illusion flames will be extinguished in the middle, and Brain Burst will not successfully install.

No... maybe, failure is better.

While holding his sweaty hands tight, Haruyuki thought like that.

In the accelerated world, the feelings of people who fought there—hatred, resentment, envy, lust and other different malicious feelings can be trapped in the whirlpool. He absolutely did not want to see the shape of the innocent Chiyuri being hurt after exposure to that.

"...Haru."

Suddenly, Takumu's sound echoed inside his head. It was a thought voice sent only to Haruyuki.

With a quick glance to his right side, he saw his childhood friend's mouth lightly biting his lips while sitting on the chair.

"I am.. afraid. That Chi-chan... might change..."

His finger quickly manipulated his virtual desktop, setting his thought voice to be sent only to Takumu, Haruyuki answered.

"We... no, you protecting her will definitely be okay, Taku. Also, we still don't know if the install will be successful for sure. On the other hand... too bad for Chiyuri, it's probably not possible."

"W...Well yeah. She said she went through some kind of amazing training, but with just two months, I don't think she can gain enough «aptitude»..."

Then, at that time.

Chiyuri's face that was turning as she looked around, became fixed to right in front of her.

As she winkled her sort of big eyebrows, her pupils moved from left to right.

Her mouth opened slightly, and the raw sound that dripped from there, Haruyuki and Takumu listened while holding their breath.

"What is, this? W...Welcome To The... Accelerated World?"

Chapter 1

The intense howl of the wind, as if it was knocking on the window, woke Haruyuki from his shallow sleep.

In the darkness, as he listened while under the mattress, he could hear numerous water droplets carried by the wind bouncing off the glass window. It seemed to have started raining sometime ago.

For sure, during the night, this wind would blow away most of the cherry blossoms from the trees around the apartment. However, unrelated to this wind, spring was a season of melancholy for Haruyuki.

There were two reasons for that. First, the humidity and temperature would rise. For Haruyuki, whose sweat function was double that of normal person's, even around 25°C, his forehead began to become moist.

And then there was the other reason: his school year would change. His long suffered days of being bullied were finally over, and he had somehow obtained a neutral position, so at this point, having his class shifted is nothing other than harassment. For unfamiliar student opponents, he had to Ping^[1] them again to determine their relationship from the beginning, and thinking about it made him feel faint.

At the very least, for the last few hours of Spring break, trying to extend it a little wouldn't warrant any punishment.

While thinking like that, Haruyuki searched on the bed's top panel and got hold of his Neuro Linker. He put it on from the back of his neck and

turned it on, and with the sound of a light motor drive, the lock arm closed. The startup stage began, then after the five senses connection check was completed, a half transparent virtual desktop appeared in front of his eyes.

At the bottom right of his view, he took a look at the time display, «2047/04/08 AM01:22», and sighed, then took a deep breath and opened his mouth.

"Burst..."

Link.

He was going to sing that magic spell, but right before that, with a faint 'message received' sound, a voice call icon lit up blue white.

He touched it with his right index finger without thinking, and realized at the same time that the call was from his childhood friend two floors below.

"...Haru, are you awake?"

When the soft voice echoed in his head, Haruyuki was slightly shocked. Chiyuri who normally sleeps at 10pm and should not wake up no matter what till 7am, what was she doing up at this hour? And for what?

While pushing the tangled thoughts to a corner of his mind, Haruyuki mumbled an answer with his thought voice.

"Just now, I woke up..."

"The wind, is pretty amazing. But, the reason for me being unable to sleep is something else."

"Unable to sleep!? You!?"

As he blurted that out, Chiyuri immediately shouted "Hey!".

"You, who do you think I am. In the first place, the reason I can't sleep is Haru's fault!"

"Huh...? M-Me...?"

"That's right. You, today... it's already yesterday, in the evening before I went home, didn't you say something strange? 'Tonight you might have a scary dream, but absolutely do not remove your Neuro Linker, or turn it off', you said. After being told that, being uneasy and unable to sleep is a matter of course!"

To be truthful, around 10 hours ago, Haruyuki did say that to Chiyuri.

The reason was simple. The duel fighting game software «Brain Burst», after its install was completed, on the first night, used a nightmare-like method to search the user's memory, looking for scars in the heart like trauma and inferiority, straining them to create their battle field alter ego, the «Duel Avatar».

Half a year ago, Haruyuki himself had the biggest nightmare in his life on the night that he obtained Brain Burst. The details were scattered so he could not remember, but the result from the software creation, was a

spindly slender body with a huge helmet headed silver avatar, «Silver Crow».

While remembering his sore disappointment fondly at that time, Haruyuki answered Chiyuri.

"N...No choice. If you don't have that dream, then your crucial duel avatar won't be created. Also... I just thought of it, do you actually have any emotional trauma..."

"That, you dare say it! I have traumas at least. Long ago, in our elementary school excursion trip, someone played games in the bus and messed up his sense of balance, became badly car sick, and finally, on my lap,"

"Excuse me. I am sorry. Please don't say anymore."

Provoked by his own trauma, Haruyuki moaned as he apologized. However Chiyuri's pursuit didn't stop, and she continued to complain as if her puffed up face could be seen.

"Ah, now that I remember it, Haru did not properly apologize that time. Perfect, you can return what you owe now."

"Wh...What!? How many years ago was that... the statute of limitations is over!"

"The 'statute of limitations' will become obsolete words soon, was what the news said the other day."

To be truthful, after all of Japan's public spaces were set up with «Social Camera Net», the statute of limitations for criminal cases were eliminated a few years ago. However if they followed this trend, then Haruyuki didn't know how much he needed to pay Chiyuri back for what he owed her.

"The «Special Law of Childhood Friends» makes anything have a one year statute of limitations."

After he mumbled that complaint, Haruyuki sighed with his real mouth, and sent out the question from his mind at the same time.

"...So then, how do I pay you back? Again, the «Enji Shop» jumble parfait?"

"I feel that the taste at that place got worse recently. It might be because their cow's milk had been changed to a milk mixture... hey, that's not it. It's troublesome to explain by mouth, so dive into my Home Net right now. I will open the gate."

"Huh...?"

While he was still blinking from the unexpected order, Chiyuri had already cut the voice connection at her end. As he watched the icon fade, Haruyuki wondered what she wanted at this time as he tilted his head, but he did not have the guts to disobey either, so as ordered, he sang the command with his flesh voice.

"Direct Link."

At that moment, with a *slush* sound effect, the dim scene of his room melted away radially and disappeared. The feelings of his body surface and weight were also cut, and then Haruyuki slowly fell into the darkness. With the Neuro Linker's «Full Dive» function, only his consciousness was released into the net.

In the view of Haruyuki, who was enjoying the floating feeling, a few round access gates came near him from below. Those, were net entrances that could be dived into. The Global Net VR spaces recorded in his favorites list, his apartment's home Local Net, and Kurashima's Home Net tag was there as well. Haruyuki extended his unseen right arm that way.

Soon a virtual pull occurred, and Haruyuki's consciousness was drawn to the small gate. When he went through with a *Supon* sound, in front of his eyes, a calm lemon yellow ring of light expanded—

"U...Uwaaa."

The scene that appeared made him involuntarily shout out.

Usually, a normal Home Net's VR space was mostly based on the house's design. The Living Room, Parlor, and family members' «Single Rooms» exist, with different things not possible in the real world like large space or decorations being customized as mostly fun places.

However right now, what spread out wide under Haruyuki's eyes were, objects with many different shapes and sizes— a sea of cushions.

Square walls did not seem to exist. Under a lovely blue sky, the pastel-colored cushions were piled up as far as the horizon. Haruyuki fell right

into the middle of that, bounced up once, then again landed on his behind.

"...Wh-What is this."

While looking at the yellow giraffe cushion lying flat right in front, the elephant cushion beside it, and also the strangely shaped one beside it and murmured that once again.

"That is an [Anomalocaris](#). A creature from the Cambrian Period."

Suddenly Chiyuri's voice echoed from behind him, and Haruyuki turned around.

Standing on top of probably an [Acanthaster](#) like black star-shaped cushion, was an elegant avatar. Its whole body covered in soft looking light purple fur, dressed in a small one piece, the cat-evolving-into-a-human kind of design, was Chiyuri's avatar that she also used in the Umesato middle school Local Net.

With a 60% cat-like face, Chiyuri blinked her large bluish green colored eyes as she snorted.

"You are still using that avatar. It's about time you changed it to something better."

After being told that, Haruyuki glanced down at his own body.

What was there was what he used at school, a pink pig-type avatar. With an almost ball shaped body, and round limbs. A flat nose stuck out from

the center of his face, and although he could not see it himself, there should be large ears growing out of his head.

It was a shape that you could not call cool or cute, and actually it was not an avatar that Haruyuki himself selected, but somehow he continued to use it. As Haruyuki moved his nose, he responded as if it was an excuse.

"I have already gotten used to the sensations of this body, and changing it now will be troublesome. Instead of that... earlier I said, 'What is this', was not referring to this strange creature, it's about the whole VR space. What is this cushion hel... heaven."

To be sure, Chiyuri liked cushion type stuffed animals from long ago, and he remembered different ones lying on her bed, but this scale was way beyond anything. 'What is the total number of objects', he inquired as he thought about it, then the cat avatar wiggled her tail with a ribbon and smiled proudly.

"Nihihi, isn't it great. Recently, as a present for going to the next grade, I got a Home Server expansion and my own user memory space. Even at this resolution, from edge to edge it is about 15km."

"Re...Really!"

At that moment he leaned back in reaction, his round behind slid, and Haruyuki fell in between the elephant and the Anomalocaris. While he fumbled around, he thought. With that much capacity, if it was him, he would recreate the battle field around Kursk in 1943. With a mountain of

Tiger tanks and T-34 tanks placed everywhere, and in the sky BF109 fighters. You would cry out, 'What a blood tingling spectacle'.

"...H-Hey Chiyu, let me play with it a bit"

"No!!"

While he was still talking, he was coldly denied, and Chiyuri stuck out her tongue for a "Be~" between the small fangs in her mouth.

"If I let Haru customize it, it will definitely become something that's oil, steel, and smoke filled."

"Th-That's just fine."

"N-o-W-a-y! Ah geesh, we haven't gotten anywhere in talks at all."

As he looked up at the cat type avatar with her slender arms crossed, Haruyuki finally remembered the reason he was called here.

"Ah... o-oh yeah. Then, what did you want me to do anyway?"

"Just sitting there is fine."

"Huh?"

Not understanding what she meant, Haruyuki threw out his short legs in front as he sat on top of a huge cushion, with his head tilted. Then, right after—

With a *bounce*, the cat type avatar jumped in front of him, and without any hesitation, she laid her supple body on top of Haruyuki's legs.

"U...Uwaa!?"

As Haruyuki jumped up to escape, Chiyuri's right hand held his nose and pulled him back to where he was.

"You, become a pillow there for a while. Then I will forget about the time of that trip. Let me warn you, if you do anything erotic, I will let the Anomalocaris bite you."

"I-I won't! Speaking of which... a pillow, what do you..."

Not answering Haruyuki's excited question, Chiyuri extended her small claw fingers and snapped them. At that moment, the calm blue sky above, turned in one direction, and changed to a night sky with a huge moon floating above.

Under the blinking stars that looked the same as constellations found in picture books— and on top of Haruyuki's knees, Chiyuri stretched widely, lay on her side and curled up.

"...There isn't, any deep meaning."

From the mouth that Haruyuki could not see, came a small whisper.

"Just, when Haru used to come for sleepovers in my home, I remembered that I soon fell asleep when you became my pillow."

"...Wh-When was that..."

"Who knows. Long... long ago."

With a "Fuwa" yawn, the cat type avatar really closed her eyes.

...This kind of role, ask Taku.

He wanted to say that, but Haruyuki swallowed back those words. While they were young, only Haruyuki had experienced being used as a pillow by Chiyuri. Due to Takumu's parent's strict educational policy, he usually did not have a chance to sleep over at either of their homes.

But, even so, would a conditional response from that long ago remain till now? Furthermore they were both animal type avatars, and this was a virtual cushion heaven created by the Neuro Linker. However, of course, he absolutely could no longer imitate this with his real body. No, even for VR it was questionable, to be truthful.

While that kind of thought spun around in his head, what was amazing was Chiyuri really starting to sleep, breathing calmly.

"...Unbelievable..."

As he groaned involuntarily, Chiyuri, whom he thought just entered sleep, mumbled in an indistinct voice.

"Hey, Haru... I, really worked hard..."

"Huh? For what...?"

"To become a Burst Linker... I tried really hard... Like this... again, we, will return. Like back then... three of us, every day, playing till the sun goes down... that... time..."

There, this time for sure Chiyuri went into a deep sleep. To the avatar that was breathing virtual air with a *Suu Suu* sound echo, he touched the soft fur under her ear, and Haruyuki answered in his chest with a sigh.

—There should be something that won't change.

—But, something that changed, and will no longer return to where it was, also exists for sure.

A few minutes later, after the Neuro Linker determined that Chiyuri had went into a deep sleep, it automatically canceled Full Dive for her. Even after the cat type avatar on his knees disappeared with a bell like sound effect, for a while Haruyuki sat in between the mute stuffed animals.

Chapter 2

On the eastern side of the Sugunami district, was the private Umesato middle school, with three classes for each grade, so its size couldn't be considered large.

Even so, as the school's total of 360 students lined up in the gym, the pressure from their looks should be considerable. If he himself was the target of that concentrated stare, Haruyuki believed that he would at least have a physical hole burnt into him.

However, standing on the podium at the school entrance ceremony, even without the help of the Neuro Linker, the dignified voice reached the back line of students, that person's face was so cool as if it did not feel a single milligram of pressure.

"...Many of you right now must have feelings of anticipation, unease, and things like that. For newly arrived students, seeing a new school, and new upperclassmen might result in great confusion. However, please think about it. Right now, those people with composed faces behind you, one or two years ago, were sitting where you were with unease exactly the same as yours..."

—Unbelievably, the person speaking those respectable words was, in the other world, a wanted destroyer, a ruthless killer, and above that a demonic trainer that would surprise even US marines.

While he grumbled in his chest, Haruyuki continued to look with unsuppressed longing, at the girl on the stage— with a black blouse and a dark red ribbon, slender long legs covered by black stockings, she was Kuroyukihime.

His relationship with that person was special— calling it like that did not convey its full meaning, and half a year later, they still had not reached the level of boyfriend and girlfriend. Inside school, the recognition from the surrounding students were similar, Kuroyukihime's sense of duty and pity saved a round underclassman, and kept him as a favorite pet to walk with, they thought of it like that.

And for Haruyuki, he was actually not dissatisfied with it. On the other hand, he thought it showed the truth. He would like to avoid being treated as a pet, instead as the knight of a princess— no, a squire, nono, a page, he would be well satisfied around there.

"...One year, is equal to 31,536,000 seconds, if that time is passed massively, then it is just an instant. I wish you all a fruitful year. And that ends my greeting."

She bowed, then turned around with her long black hair swaying, and returned to the line of student council members in the back.

While he was desperately clapping his hands along with all of the school's students, he went into idle thought.

Today, I will be in my 2nd year, and senpai will be in her 3rd year. That means in just one year— that person will graduate from Umesato middle school.

No, that does not mean their relationship would be broken. That person and him, other than upperclassman and lowerclassman in the same school, had a far stronger relationship— they had their Burst Linker «Parent Child» bond.

He closed his eyes tightly once, and when he opened them again, Haruyuki clapped his hands together hard.

At that time—

Haruyuki who was staring intently at Kuroyukihime on the stage, felt that he saw the detached beauty subtly move suddenly.

Her narrowed jet black pair of eyes, stopped at the foremost group of fresh first year students, and soon returned to looking in front. Haruyuki wrinkled his eyebrows, and straightened his back on the chair in an attempt to see who Kuroyukihime was staring at, but of course he could not find one person in the middle of everyone wearing the same uniform.

After the school's entrance ceremony had finished, Haruyuki, who returned to the school building, almost went to the 3rd floor in a daze, and hurriedly changed direction to his new classroom on the 2nd floor.

The class he was placed in was already announced through the Local Net, but other students' names would not be known to him till he entered the

classroom. *I beg you, please don't have anyone in class who will call me «Pig-kun» again, or make me buy buns and other things!*, with that wish, Haruyuki passed through the 2nd year C class door—

"Haru, Hi!"

With that sound, his back was knocked on with full force, so his breath was stopped.

When he turned 90 degrees to the left at a high speed, what he saw was the cat type hairpin holding up the front bangs as usual, the face of his childhood friend with a smile showing her canine teeth.

"...Chi-Chiyu. You... here?"

"What? What's with that complex looking face?"

Seeing that pout, Haruyuki wondered in his heart if she really saw that «nightmare» last night, and answered.

"No, nothing."

That's right, even if he was in the same class as Chiyuri, if he did not get bullied again, then he did not need to fear. But, there was a problem aside that. With this, the triangle's side lengths would again become subtly—

"Hey, Haru. Chi-chan too."

His back was knocked on again, and this time Haruyuki turned 90 degrees to the right. When he looked up, he saw Takumu's smiling face behind blue glasses.

Somehow the three of them seemed to be placed in the same class. That meant the triangle shrunk while keeping the same size. While remembering Chiyuri last night saying, "We can return right, to that time", he realized there was some disturbance in his chest, and Haruyuki made the same smile while saying.

"Hi, Taku is also in C class huh. ...Let's see."

Faintly recalling the probability calculation for this situation, he mouthed the answer.

"The probability of the three of us being in the same class is... $\frac{1}{3}$ over $\frac{1}{3}$ over $\frac{1}{3}$, that is $\frac{1}{27}$ huh. This is an incredible coincidence."

Then, while walking towards the window, Takumu lightly shook his head.

"No, that is $\frac{1}{9}$."

"Huh, why?"

"Why?"

Chiyuri who reached the same answer as Haruyuki, also asked in surprise at the same time. While leaning his smart tall body on the window ledge, Takumu explained after pushing his frameless glasses up.

"If it was «the probability of us three being in C class», then it would be $\frac{1}{27}$ as Haru said. But, in this case where the class is does not matter. So it becomes «the three of us together in A class, B class, or C class», then the number is 3 times, and becomes $\frac{1}{9}$."

"Ah—!"

"I see!"

Again, he and Chiyuri nodded at the same time, and Haruyuki finally added with a smile.

"As expected from Taku, during Spring Break you sharpened the Professor character huh..."

"Haru, really stop that! If I am given a nickname as «Professor» or «Glasses guy», it will be Haru's fault."

While making a seriously unpleasant face, Takumu took a glance at the 2nd year C classroom increasingly filled with more students and said in a low voice.

"...Anyway, there are all sort of coincidences in the world, and if you calculate it, you can see that it is relatively higher probability than your impression, that is what it means. That's why I think we should be prepared just in case."

"Huh? For what?"

Takumu got close to Haruyuki's blank looking face, and whispered with a low sound—

"The new first years. In that 120 people, there is a possibility of unknown Burst Linkers mixed in it."

After hearing that, Haruyuki took a momentary sharp breath, then shook his head slightly.

"Th-That... possibility is not zero, but, would they go into a school other than their «Parent»'s school? If they transfer in like Taku then that is another story..."

"Yeah, normally, you don't make a «Child» of someone going to a different school than you. Because, if that school has another Burst Linker, there is a very high possibility that your «Child» will be taken into the fighting force of that side. The strongest relationship in the accelerated world is «Parent Child», but «Same School» is next to that..."

Like Takumu said, for Burst Linkers that are going to the same school, eventually they would unavoidably commit «Reality Intrusion» with each other. If they started fighting, then that fight would always be to the death with no game rules. In that situation, to protect their Brain Burst, they would have to cease fire and make up eventually.

That's why many Burst Linkers did not pick someone who had a possibility of going to a different school from theirs to be their «Child». That means, the Burst Linkers in Umesato middle school right now should be Kuroyukihime, Haruyuki, Takumu —and Chiyuri too— only those, in this situation, you could say there should be almost no unknown Burst Linker that would be a new first year student.

However, of course that did not mean they didn't have to check to make sure.

While trying to think back to when he was a new student last year, Haruyuki asked Takumu.

"Let's see... When would be the first time a new student connects to the Local Net?"

"It should be soon. If it is the same as the school I previously attended, certainly after the school entrance ceremony ends, while moving to the classroom, when the account is first given out."

With that answer, after thinking for a bit, Haruyuki said with a snicker.

"...Then, let's do this. Since checking will use up 1 Burst Point anyway, we might as well see what kind of Duel Avatar Chiyu obtained in the «Duel Field». When the homeroom that is next ends, I will «Accelerate» and challenge Chiyu, so Taku can join in the gallery."

Their new homeroom teacher was a young male teacher in charge of Japanese history. The teacher called Sugeno, as opposed to his age, was a very firm "Children don't need the Net" advocate, so Haruyuki did not feel close to him, but his hot blood fever got along with the other students.

If you search the Net for everything, then you will become an adult that cannot think with your head!, while ignoring that kind of expressed belief belonging to Sugeno, the student self introduction was somehow over,

and right after the first period homeroom ended, Haruyuki sang the acceleration command in his mouth.

"Burst Link."

After the *Viiiiii!* dry thunder like sound echoed all over inside his brain, the surrounding scene was all dyed blue.

At the same time, Sugeno who was stepping off the teacher's podium, and the other students who were going to stand up from their chairs, all suddenly stopped.

The time did not stop. The «Brain Burst» program that was hiding inside Haruyuki's Neuro Linker, only accelerated his consciousness 1000 times.

On the left side of his virtual desktop, he touched the burning «B» icon, and started the game console. While the matching list refreshed, he waited somewhat in anticipation.

On the very top of the list, soon «Silver Crow», that is Haruyuki's own Duel Avatar's name floated. The right side showed level 4.

Continuing was «Black Lotus», that is Kuroyukihime. Of course, level 9. Next, was at same level as Haruyuki, «Cyan Pile»— that is, Takumu's name appeared.

With a tiny delay, another line of letters popped up shining.

«Lime Bell». Level 1.

At that time, the list's 'Searching' display disappeared. That meant, at this moment, there were four Burst Linkers connected to the Umesato middle school Local Net. And then, «Lime Bell» without a doubt would be Chiyuri.

At this time, without exception, all 120 new first year students should have signed into the Local Net, so he could conclude that there really were no new Burst Linkers among those students.

However, there was one thing that nagged at him, if he really wanted to mention it.

During the school entrance ceremony, from the top of the stage, Kuroyukihime momentarily stared at the line of new students sharply. What did that mean?

I should send her an email to check, he thought that for an instant, but since Kuroyukihime who is the vice president of the student council should be swamped by a mountain of different tasks right now, he changed his mind.

As his avatar's finger extended towards the names of four Burst Linkers in Umesato middle school, Haruyuki had a quick thought.

Lime, that is probably a yellowish green color. A little close combat kind of indirect attack type. However what kind of ability she actually had, he would not know till he saw it in the duel.

Duel Avatar is a manifestation of its owner's sense of inferiority—. From half year ago, Kuroyukihime's words rang in his ears.

Of course, just by looking at the avatar's appearance, one could not instantly fathom the owner's «Emotional scars». Actually, right now Haruyuki still could not determine what was Takumu and Kuroyukihime's sense of inferiority that created such powerful avatars.

Even so, it was true that it exposed the «Hidden inside».

In his blue frozen view, Haruyuki glanced at the back of Chiyuri that was a bit away to his left side. Swallowing his slight hesitation, he touched the name «Lime Bell», and clicked «Duel» from the pop-up menu.

The field that appeared had huge gears and conveyors moving around in a rumble, the «Construction Site» stage.

While waiting for himself to be changed to the silver colored «Silver Crow», and the burning word 'FIGHT' to pop up, he slowly stood up.

He looked around the 2nd year C classroom where his classmates had disappeared, and in exchange were filled with mysterious machines, and first saw the large blue avatar, «Cyan Pile». After giving a quick nod to him, Haruyuki looked at the one standing opposite of him, a delicate avatar that was similar to his.

«Lime Bell» was covered in unexpectedly vivid lettuce green equipment.

The whole body's supple lines showed a clearly female shape. The limbs and body were mostly slender like Silver Crow's, and the waist was equipped with a tree leaf like armor.

The head was covered with a magic-user-like wide-brim pointed hat, and under that was a face mask with eyes that resembled a cat's.

However the most distinctive feature was, the huge bell-shaped equipment in her left hand, probably a hand bell. While thinking whether it was a weapon or a musical instrument, just as it looked like, Haruyuki walked towards her.

While looking at the bell connected to her left hand, «Lime Bell»—Chiyuri tilted her head and said.

"Somehow... isn't this color too flashy?"

"Don't complain, such high color saturation, even if you wanted it, doesn't show up often."

"On the other hand."

Under the hat, the orange colored eyes narrowed in doubt.

"...You, are Haru?"

"...Yes. I understand what you want to say, so you don't need to say it!"

He quickly added that, but Chiyuri shouted without mercy.

"No way! This game's avatar, is a representation of trauma... right? Hmm, hoo, I see."

"Leave it alone."

After taking a glance at the body that is over half more slender than his real body, he turned his head away.

Then, he saw that Cyan Pile had appeared there some time ago.

The blue avatar with a pile driver equipped on his right hand, was looking down at the yellowish green avatar with a somewhat tense look.

Chiyuri also accepted those eyes silently.

Once— half year ago, Takumu could not endure the fear of losing that avatar «Cyan Pile», and put a backdoor program into Chiyuri's Neuro Linker.

That virus's real objective was to use Chiyuri's Neuro Linker as a stage to connect to Umesato middle school's Local Net from the outside, and hunt the accelerated world's highest bounty, the «Black King», Black Lotus.

However as a side effect of the virus, it made it possible for Takumu to steal Chiyuri's sight and hearing information, and he put that to use to find out Chiyuri's real feelings.

Eventually he confessed, and Chiyuri who he apologized to went into a rage, of course. She announced the breaking of ties to both Haruyuki and Takumu, and it took a week before she talked to them again. To fulfill her presented «All she can eat of Enji shop's parfait» condition for settlement, the two of their Neuro Linker's charge limit easily dropped, but the three's relationship, was repaired to the same as before—

That, was what Haruyuki believed, and wished it to be, but.

The three sides of the triangle, the one connecting Chiyuri and Takumu, was still changing unstably right now, was what their looks at each other showed.

"...Well, it is about time we start the beginner lessons."

Trying to break through the tension, Haruyuki announced and turned towards the yellowish green avatar.

"Chiyu, you have already heard of most of this «Brain Burst» rules from Taku right?"

"Yeah. All I need to do is, win a lot of duels to earn points, then become level 10 to clear the game right?"

"...D-Don't say it so simply. Well, that is right though..."

If that person heard Chiyuri's indifferent words, what would she say, while Haruyuki shook his head thinking like that, he continued.

"An-Anyway, to win a duel, you have to see through the opponent's weakness and fight in a way that is advantageous to you. For that reason, you have to fully grasp your avatar's abilities."

—Unbelievable, that a day where I said such bossy words to someone would come.

While noticing that slight realization, he moved his right index finger.

"Around this part in your view, should be your own «Health Gauge» right? Touch that, and from the expanded window open the «Skill List»."

Normally this was the Parent's role for Takumu, but the flow of conversation somehow had Haruyuki pointing it out to her,

"O...Okay."

Chiyuri, who nodded, with somewhat awkward movements extended her finger, and tapped a point in the air. Continuing, she did a few more manipulations.

"Let's see... normal skills, three of them, and looks like one special skill. «Citron Call»...? Somehow, the left hand bell... like this..."

While murmuring, Chiyuri followed the skill list animation silhouette, spinning the huge bell that was in front of her left elbow around twice, and finally from above coming down with a snap. But of course, nothing happened.

"What is this, it didn't do anything."

"To use special skills, you have to fill the blue «Special Gauge» below the Health Gauge."

"That, how do I fill it?"

"Damage the opponent, take damage yourself, and..."

As he reached that point, Chiyuri lifted her heavy looking bell and raised it, aiming for Haruyuki's head, as he hurriedly added.

"Th-That and also, you can fill it by destroying the stage. The machines around there, any of them can be destroyed!"

"Ah, I see."

It might be his imagination that she nodded with some slight dissatisfaction, and walked towards the steam engine sitting where the teacher's podium was, then without any hesitation, she used her left hand to hit the machine that was putting out a lot of steam.

With a *Boom!* light explosion sound, sparks and white smoke spew out.

"Wow, feels great!"

With innocent sounds of joy, the pointed hat avatar started hitting and destroying one side of the gears turning the belt conveyor, as Haruyuki's back shivered while watching her. The realism of that explosion, and the stage's ultra high detail, not showing signs of being impressed even by a little, this is why girls are...

While Haruyuki grumbled in his heart, the silent till now Takumu whispered from beside him.

"Haru, did you notice it? Chi-chan's HP gauge, did not seem to drop at all. For the «Construction Site» machine objects, when you destroy it, you should take a little damage."

"Ah... that's right."

"Unlike her appearance, her defense is pretty high. «Green» is originally, the next below «Metal Color», a superior defense color..."

With Takumu's calm analysis, Haruyuki thought of the rumored «Green King»'s iron wall legend.

Lime Bell's armor, compared to the level 1 Silver Crow, was clearly harder. That means, Chiyuri is also a defensive type. That is completely opposite of the real person's personality, somehow.

While thinking about those things, Lime Bell's special gauge was filled to near half while shining blue.

"Hey Chiyu, that's plenty."

After being called out, the avatar that turned around came walking close—

And without a single hesitation, raised the huge bell in her left hand high.

"Higuu!?"

In front of Haruyuki, who screamed, and held both hands up to protect his head in reflex.

After two half clockwise spins, the bell was suddenly covered with a brilliant yellowish green shine.

"...«Citron Ca~ll»!!"

With the relatively proper skill name shout, from the bell that was swung straight down, with a *Rigorioriin* kind of magnificent sound effect, light particles that covered Silver Crow's whole body spewed out.

"...!"

Unable to predict what kind of damage he would take, Haruyuki held his breath and closed his eyes. Heat, impact, or some unknown name acid dissolving attack might be possible—

"...Huh?"

"...Oh?"

From his left and right ear, Chiyuri and Takumu's quizzical sounds reached him, and Haruyuki opened his eyes slightly.

As he nervously looked down at his body, it still shone the same fresh white silver color. He did not feel any pain or heat, and his HP bar did not decrease at all.

"What is this! Nothing happened!!"

To Chiyuri's indignant shout, he shook his head on reaction.

"Th...That should not be it. Your skill, without a doubt hit me... your special skill gauge also decreased. Overtime damage... not that either. Delayed start damage, maybe...?"

As he mumbled, he waited for something to happen, but a few seconds, then a few tens of seconds later, Silver Crow's HP did not move at all.

"Hmm... this means, light and sound only, some kind of eye dazzling skill maybe. That is sort of yellow color type..."

Haruyuki's words did not seem to ease Chiyuri's dissatisfaction, and she put her right hand to her waist.

"That is boring! Haru, give me one of your special skills!!"

"What, that is impossible. Anyway, my special skill is just a Head Butt."

"At this point, I will take even that."

As this bargaining expanded to something that's no different from reality, suddenly Takumu said in a low murmur.

"No... for just a dazzle skill, the decrease in the special skill gauge is way too much. Even though it was half full, all of it was used up... some kind of, there should be a more practical effect..."

With his strong arms crossed, Cyan Pile lowered his small slits lined face.

"Not damage, not Debuff^[2]... that means... ah... wait, just maybe...!!"

His sharp sound made both Haruyuki and Chiyuri turn their heads at the same time.

"What is it, Taku? Did you think of something?"

"...Well yeah, something with unbelievable feeling though... Chi-chan, with that bell, hit Haru normally."

"Okay, understood."

Gochiri~n!!

Before Takumu's words finished or not, Chiyuri without a single hint of holding back, swung the huge bell down, and Haruyuki who took that right on his head, saw numerous stars in his view.



"O-Ouch..."

As he moaned, the relentless directions continued.

"The gauge is still not enough. About three more times."

"Okay, understood."

Zukazukazukari~n!!

...Chiyu's bell is nice. When it hits, incredibly nice sounds come out.

While he was thinking that and other stuff, Haruyuki abruptly fainted while laying with his arms and legs spread apart.

For the duel fighting game that is Brain Burst, just leveling up would not majorly increase HP, Attack, and Defense. With new special skills and abilities obtained, tactics can be expanded, but if you get hit without defending like this, corresponding damage occurred. The result, after Haruyuki was hit for four times, his HP gauge decreased by about 30%, and in exchange, Chiyuri's special skill gauge again filled over half, shining blue.

While moaning, Haruyuki somehow managed to stand up, and in front of his eyes—

Again the bell was spun around, and yellowish green light effect shone.

—That's strange, when I was first lectured by senpai, this «Using the mentor's body to teach skill» scene never happened.

—Anyway, in the first place, why am I the duel opponent for Chiyu?

As he thought about that now too late, Chiyuri's second skill-name shout, louder than the earlier one, started.

"Citron Ca~~III!"

The clear sound of a bell. A lime green ribbon of light overflowed out. And then, lightly drifting by, was a fresh citrus scent.

That covered Silver Crow's body in layers. At that moment.

"Uaaa...!?"

Haruyuki experienced something which he had not experienced in the accelerated world for a few months, a shock to the bottom of his heart which made him shout out loud.

In his view's upper left corner, his HP bar that was decreased by about 30%—

Was slowly *recovering*!

HP recovery.

For duel fighting genre games, that is originally an impossible phenomenon. Actually, till now Haruyuki had not seen a single HP gauge recovery ability in «Brain Burst».

No, to be exact, there might be one exception that he had seen. Three months ago, after an incredible battle and destruction, the cursed enhanced armament, «Chrome Disaster» that was annihilated. That avatar

had an ability that could «Drain» the opponent's health that he ate to heal his wounds.

However, since during the Disaster fight, they were in the «Unlimited Neutral Field» where other people's HP gauge could not be seen, this was the first time he actually saw a HP gauge recover.

Within just about 10 seconds, his HP was returned to full, and the yellowish green light disappeared at the same time.

However Haruyuki, and Takumu who was a bit further away, could not move or make a sound.

What released them from their paralysis, was the dissatisfied shout from Chiyuri.

"No way, what's that?! Your Hit Points were fully recovered!! No fair, that didn't count!!"

"No... it's not that I am not playing fair..."

With his raspy voice he said till that point, then looked at Takumu, begging for an explanation.

Cyan Pile opened his blue eyes inside the small slits wide, and eventually shook his head left and right as he whispered.

"Wh... what a thing... That right now was without a doubt, «Recovery Ability». Chi-chan's avatar is a «Healer»..."

"What? That means a priest? That is boring."

Continuing after the somewhat dissatisfied Chiyuri, Haruyuki who finally came out of his shock, gave his honest opinion.

"Healer... First time I heard of it. Brain Burst has this kind too."

However, on the other hand, Takumu whispered in a somehow fearful voice.

"Instead of boring... it's an outrageously rare avatar. With this, Chi-chan's «Duel» debut might become very serious... Just maybe, beyond the time when Silver Crow appeared..."

Chapter 3

"Say what?"

That short speech, and the continuing long silence, showed her huge shock.

In the real world she was the Umesato middle school student council vice president, in the accelerated world she was the Legion «Nega Nebulas»' leader, also Haruyuki's «Parent», a level 9 Burst Linker, the Black King, «Black Lotus» that is who Kuroyukihime is. Yet she stared at Haruyuki's face for over 5 seconds, then finally returned the cup held in her right hand to the saucer.

"...Kurashima-kun becoming a Burst Linker, had about fifty-fifty expectation... but of all things a «Healer»..."

She combed up her long black hair, and leaned back onto the white painted chair as she gave a small sigh. On top of the jet black blouse, the brand new dark red ribbon gave out bewitching light.

In these days he felt she was more and more intensely beautiful, so Haruyuki became dazed in fascination.

2047, April 10th, Wednesday, afternoon 3:30pm.

As usual, they were seated facing each other in the lounge beside the student cafeteria, at a table deep inside. During lunch time, this place was fully occupied, but after school in this place where you cannot connect to

the Global Net, there was not anyone who was whimsical enough to stay, so right now there was not any other students here.

Chiyuri becoming a Burst Linker, her avatar «Lime Bell»'s special ability shocked Haruyuki and Takumu, two days had already passed. At the start of school year, Kuroyukihime was swamped with student council related work, without her even able to have time for lunch, so it was today that they were finally able to talk to each other directly.

Chiyuri's installation success from Takumu's copy, and her avatar's name, were already reported to Kuroyukihime two days ago. He really wanted to write about that avatar's shocking ability as well, but Takumu said "It's better to tell her when you directly meet her", with that strong insistence, so it was today that he explained it to her.

After he used a small voice to apologize for the late report, Kuroyukihime finally looked back, and shook her head with a 'No'.

"For that, Takumu-kun's judgement is correct. If there was even a slight chance, that this information was leaked to other Burst Linkers on the net, it would be a big problem."

"It...It's to that extent?"

"Without a doubt. The Burst Linkers in Tokyo will come gather in Suginami, before Kurashima-kun... Lime Bell joined some kind of legion, they will try to recruit her with different kind of measures taken, for certain."

After that was said with a slight wry smile, Haruyuki was again dazed in wonderment.

After stepping into the accelerated world for half a year yet not seeing or hearing of it, made him understand the rarity of «Recovery Ability». However, to be able to start scouting battles, that wasn't peaceful at all.

Talking about rarity, Haruyuki's «Flight Ability» was rare in the rares. However, even with his «Nega Nebulas» tag, he was marked to be invited to another legion two or three times.

While feeling a huge surprise, Haruyuki mumbled an inquiry.

"B-But... Why? She had not even debuted in an actual fight yet..."

"Nn... about that..."

After showing her thinking about how to answer, Kuroyukihime suddenly held up one finger.

"You might understand if I tell you this. Seven years after the birth of accelerated world, only two Burst Linkers have appeared with «Recovery Ability». One of them, after getting past countless invitations and assassination traps, is still in good health. The other one could not endure the repeated conflict, and retired from the accelerated world due to self decision."

"Re..."

Retired. So that meant, erasing your Brain Burst by yourself, right?

To the paralyzed Haruyuki, Kuroyukihime showed a slight cynical expression.

"Well, I have to call it as, «Troubled by two princes seeking love, then finally jumping off the tower», that kind of princess-ish sickness worsen as time pass."

"No, no way, that's too blunt..."

Haruyuki involuntarily pulled his cheek, then Kuroyukihime said some even more dreadful things.

"Fortunately, Kurashima-kun isn't like that type at all. On the contrary, I can't say that there would be two princes fighting over her."

While she was laughing with "Hahaha", Haruyuki involuntarily glanced behind to check that no one was there, and quickly returned to the topic.

"B-But, that, why just having that «Recovery Ability» can cause that much uproar...?"

"Just imagine it. During official territory battle, you took a lot of effort to decrease the opponent's front line avatar's HP, then that guy retreated, and when he came back his HP is all full. To say it truthfully..."

"...To continue fighting would be pointless."

That definitely is tough. Or more like awful.

Haruyuki nodded, then Kuroyukihime casually opened her right hand and added.

"So it is like this. If the enemy team has a healer, you have to take that person down first no matter what. On the other hand, that kind of thinking is easily read by the other side, and they can use ambushes, pincer attacks, and other traps as much as they like."

"...I see..."

"To say it clearly, even right now, for the situation where the enemy contains a healer, counter strategies for it have not been established at all."

After hearing the words said with a snicker, Haruyuki blinked hard.

"Err, wait a minute. Earlier you said that, 'right now there is only one healer'... ah, except Chiyu, that is... Is that right? Then, if the legion that Burst Linker belong to «feels like it», is it possible for them to unify the accelerated world...?"

"For possibility then it certainly is conceivably. More than enough."

"Why did they not do it?"

For Haruyuki's simple question, Kuroyukihime had a wry smile for an instant, that soon disappeared.

From the narrowed jet black eyes, a sharp light went across them— he felt it like that. The sound that she released, was also mixed with a strangely cold echo that was different from before.

"The reason is simple. That healer is one of the «Pure Color Six Kings» right now. Even if they have 99% success rate in team battles, with just

one loss from another King, at that time «Acceleration» will be lost. Therefore, that person won't appear on the battle field."

"One of... the Kings!?"

Haruyuki almost dropped the Oolong tea paper cup he was holding up, and hurriedly held it with both hands.

"What color!?"

He asked that after a cough, but somehow the answer did not come soon.

Kuroyukihime who was looking down, seemed to hesitate for a long while, then eventually shook her head.

"...Sorry, right now about that person, I don't want you to even hear her name. I don't want you to have a single grain of interest in that person."

"What? That... What does that mean?"

Not able to grasp Kuroyukihime's intention, Haruyuki asked a stupid question.

Instead of answering, a question was asked back.

"Hey, Haruyuki-kun. Let me ask you something odd... You, in this half year, how many times have you been scouted by other legions?"

"Huh!?"

With his back suddenly stretched straight, Haruyuki opened and closed his mouth many times.

However of course, he could not choose to lie to her. So he told the truth in an almost inaudible voice.

"That is... including the Niko incident three months ago, from the «King» controlled six huge legions, twice. Other than those, from a small legion, once. Bu-But of course, I instantly rejected all of them right then!!"

He desperately add the last part, but unfortunately Kuroyukihime did not seem to be impressed by it— on the other hand she was bothered by something else, and wrinkled her eyebrows as she asked again.

"Fumu. That other one from the six huge legion, basically what color was it?"

"...Let's see... that was, Blue I think..."

After his answer, a few seconds later, Kuroyukihime took a small long breathe.

"...Is that so, I see. However, Blue huh. Even though they kept sending assassins every week, that is way too shameless."

"Th-That's right."

With the white beautiful face finally going into a slight smile, Haruyuki also relaxed his speech, and then tilted his head.

"But, what about it?"

"Of course, I believed. That you will absolutely not accept another King's invitation. I believe, but... even so, I cannot stop feeling unease. Because that guy's attraction is absolute..."

Which color King she mean for «that guy», Haruyuki could not understand.

While Haruyuki was confused, he looked up at the evening sky, and Kuroyukihime suddenly raised her right hand. With a delicate gesture, she caressed the line from Haruyuki's round cheek to his jaw, and at the same time whispered. That sound was smooth as silk, but at the same time a tense coldness from somewhere was mixed in it.

"Haruyuki-kun. Listen... You are mine. Up till now, and from now on. For eternity, I will not give you to anyone."

With the sudden touch and announcement, Haruyuki opened his eyes wide, and forgot to breath as he was paralyzed.

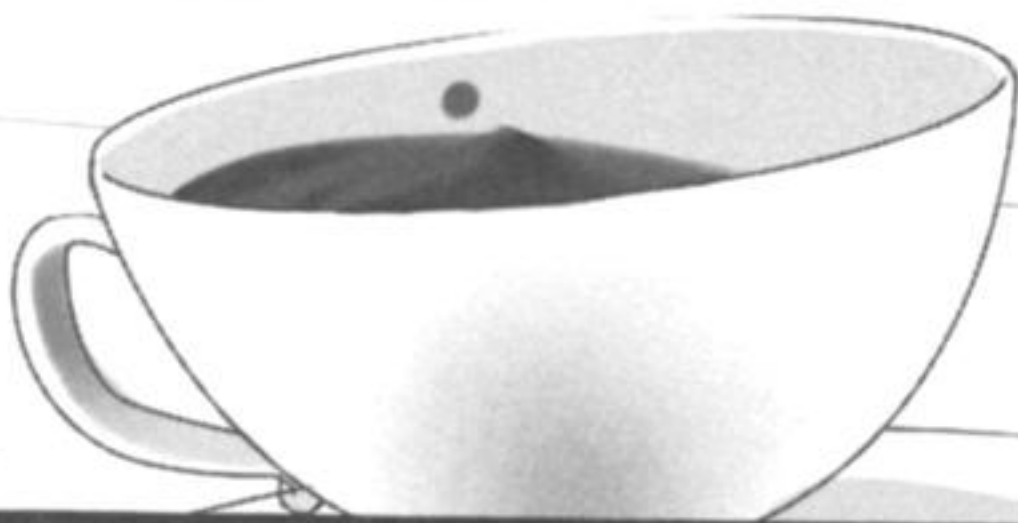
Taking the words at face value, a confession of love - he could accept it like that. However in Haruyuki's ears, even after Kuroyukihime closed her mouth, he felt that he could hear a sound that did not become voice.

—If you go to another King, I will cut you before that.

While feeling terror running down his back, even so Haruyuki answered in his heart.

—At that time, please cut me without mercy.

At the same time, he responded with a joking like sound.



"Of-Of course. If you want, you can write your name on my avatar with an oil type marker pen."

"...Fufu, that is good thinking. Let me tell you, it really exists on the «other side». A non-erasable pen."

"Wh-What!?"

With Haruyuki's surprised face, Kuroyukihime finally showed a normal smile, and lowered her hand to pick up her tea for a sip.

"Sorry, we got a bit off topic. The main topic is about Kurashima-kun. I think that I have already conveyed to you how rare «Healer type avatar» is..."

She returned her cup, and after looking far away for a bit, she made a small nod.

"Certainly, as Takumu-kun said, this needs to be handled with care. After the news of the 3rd «Healer»'s appearance in the accelerated world is spread, different powers will be scheming after Kurashima-kun."

After hearing that, Haruyuki also felt unease.

He did not think that Chiyuri would easily accept other legion's invitation, however what's said and done, «Nega Nebulas»'s leader is Kuroyukihime who is in no way on friendly terms with Chiyuri. If those two had a big fight, and Chiyuri being impulsive. She might leave the legion on momentum, and the situation where she might be fished up by the enemy group could happen— no, the probability is pretty high—

"...It could happen, that..."

After murmuring, a tremor shook his back, and Kuroyukihime said after a big sigh.

"Here, I really need to open up and have a discussion with her."

"...Th-That's right."

When they have that discussion, he definitely would not want to be there, and also he felt uneasy about something that exists but couldn't be seen. At least before that he need Takumu to find ways to deal with all kinds of development, and put effort into them having a good resolution.

—*Let's work hard. Maximum work hard.*

With that decision, he held his right fist that was below the table tightly, and at that moment, however Kuroyukihime said something unexpected.

"Well, anyway, it's a topic that's ten days too early to approach."

"Huh? Te-Ten days? Why wait that long?"

"Why, you say...?"

With a slightly dumbfounded expression, the black clothed upperclassman readily answered.

"School field trip."

"What!?"

"It should be written in the yearly schedule file distributed during today's homeroom. From the Sunday four days later, the new 3rd year students will be going on a one week school field trip. The destination is Okinawa, so think about what you want for a gift."

—*Okinawa!?*

In his brain, Rafute — Mimiga — Sokisoba^[3], those and other words scrolled one after another, but you can't bring those things all the way to Tokyo, so it must be that, that donut like, that is, Sata...

"Andagi^[4]? But if that is not freshly fried, it's not tasty."

Somehow he had said it out loud, and after Kuroyukihime replied, he snapped back to normal, and hurriedly shook his head.

"Wa-Wait a minute please. One week!? Then Chiyu's matter can wait... no, before that, what about the next weekend's territory battle!?"

«Official Territory Battle», or normally called Territory Battle, occurs every Saturday evening, it is a team battle to fight over a legion's area of control.

The Black legion, «Nega Nebulas» that Haruyuki belonged to, currently controls Suginami 1st to 3rd battle fields, that is all of Suginami, but to maintain that control, they have to keep 50% wins of opponent challenges that come during territory battle.

Team battle's win or loss is determined by either side's total destruction, or if time up then the remaining number of people, and furthermore if

same number then by the amount of remaining HP gauge. Recently, Haruyuki was no longer completely shot down like before even if the opponent was a sniper, but that was because he had his leader Kuroyukihime with overwhelming attack power for an attacker there, so he felt at ease.

No, even before that, the reason they could match the challenger's team in numbers was only when they have three or more people for defense. One person, or two people could go out for defense, so this would mean that—

"Wha? You mean, just Taku and I have to handle three enemy opponents?"

"Fumu, well, that is what it means."

After a nonchalant nod, Kuroyukihime swelled the milk tea in her cup.

"The ideal way is, if Kurashima-kun joined our legion in time for next week, we might overcome that... but one week after becoming a Burst Linker, going into a territory battle might be asking too much. Anyway, with you and Takumu-kun for tag team, you can outdo those three person team."

"Ye...Yeah..."

He definitely did not dislike being told that, so Haruyuki showed a subtle smile.

"I will put in the effort, but... th-then, if that could not happen it could not be helped right. We can take it back the week after right."

"No, that's no good."

She turned her head to the side.

"This Suginami, I cannot stand having another legion's flag on it. Since it's like this, Haruyuki-kun. Defend it till death."

"Defend it till death!?"

Looking at Haruyuki who was going to be in tears, Kuroyukihime gave an 'Oh dear!' kind of smile.

And then, suddenly said an incredible line.

"Let's see... Then, let's do this. If next week's defense is successful, as a reward I will grant you one wish. It can be anything. How about that?"

"Reward!?"

Suddenly, Kuroyukihime's words that could only be like a physical attack hit him directly between his eyes, and Haruyuki leaned back on his chair. He dangerously recovered his balance, and returned to the front with a *Clank*, with both of his hands shaking.

Anything...? What is anything!? All I can eat of school meals? No, that is possible for shops outside school too?

Nono, it's not limited to eating. Like just the two of them going out somewhere... No, asking her to come play at his home... Then getting direct

connection... Furthermore with cable length of one meter, no, 50cm, no, 30cm is also possible? Is it possible!?

"Ah, let me warn you, a wish beyond my ability is impossible. Like eating spaghetti through the nose."

"Wh...Who could do that!!"

With his pink fantasy fully wiped, Haruyuki slid down on his chair.

After shaking his head lightly many times, his thoughts returned to normal.

"An...Anyway, I will put out my full effort... Also, while senpai is away, I will give Chiyu the basic lectures..."

"Good. After that, I will give her joining request for the legion."

At that point, Kuroyukihime took a quick glance at the clock display on the edge of her view.

"...So, I should return to the student council room soon. That's right, didn't you have something you want to talk about?"

"Ah, I had."

After nodding, Haruyuki quickly continued.

"No, it's not something important though. The new first year students, there doesn't seem to be a Burst Linker in it, just that."

"You also checked huh. I also looked at the matching list through the school's Local Net earlier, indeed the addition was Kurashima-kun... «Lime Bell» only..."

As she said that, there seemed to be a bit of unclear feeling mixed in her tone, and Haruyuki suddenly remembered Kuroyukihime's one instance of stare from above the stage during school entrance ceremony. So he timidly asked about that.

"Ah... Senpai, after you finished your speech, did you notice someone in the first years?"

Then Kuroyukihime made a "Fu" wry smile, and shook her head.

"You managed to see that. No, it's not to the degree of noticing. To say it strongly... I felt a presence, something like that."

"P-Presence?"

"You should also have experienced it. In the «Duel Field», somewhere a sniper is hidden while aiming the scope at you, like that..."

That was the highest rank unpleasant feeling for Haruyuki in the accelerated world, so his face involuntarily stiffened, but soon after Kuroyukihime shook her finger with 'Nono' gesture.

"In the end, there were no new Burst Linkers in the first year students, so it's my hallucination. ...Well then, I will excuse myself here."

"Ah... I am going home as well."

Haruyuki had already become a brand new 2nd year student, so he now had the privilege to use the lounge, but he did not have the guts to remain in this fancy space by himself. He stood up after Kuroyukihime, and put his cup in the recycling bin, then an incoherent thought crossed his mind.

—That earlier «Anything reward», could that also apply to Taku?

No, no way, he wanted to deny it like that, but to Kuroyukihime for Brain Burst related matters, she treated Haruyuki and Takumu exactly the same way. If it was a reward for working hard during territory battle, then it would not be strange to be for both of them.

—But, even so, for Taku who is single minded about Chiyu, he should not request something far out of senpai.

—But that guy also hardcore worships senpai. He used «Master» to call her too. For a knight, Taku is way more appropriate... Senpai would also not be dissatisfied with it...

Following to the left behind of Kuroyukihime who was walking towards the cafeteria entrance, with his brain giving out steam due to over thinking, Haruyuki involuntarily said.

"Ah... That is, senpai."

"Nn?"

Looking at the profile of the white face that turned around with glossy hair swaying, after he opened and closed his mouth a few times, Haruyuki fearfully inquired.

"Earlier, the talk about two princes and one princess. That, how would senpai decide...?"

Then, Kuroyukihime put up a fearless smile and instantly replied.

"I don't even have to think about it. Fight with me, I will pick the winner."

And then, while walking, she extended her left hand index and middle fingers lined straight, and aimed right at Haruyuki's heart.

Hiii'

His back cowered, and after stubbing his toes on the leg of the cafeteria long table, Haruyuki again realized.

Having strange suspicions of this person is absolutely meaningless.

Chapter 4

On the following day, Thursday after school, afternoon 2:50pm.

Haruyuki was hurriedly walking towards an area of the school that he did not remember going too often in his one year of school life.

Umesato middle school was built like very old traditional schools where the normal classroom building is connected to the special classroom building by the sports building in a H shape.

In the horizontal part of that H shape, beside the gym that held the school entrance ceremony, was the martial arts gym that Haruyuki was aiming for. Of course, he was not going to join the judo club to work his overweight body. If there was a «Special Forces Club» that taught shooting and martial arts, then he might have thought about joining, but unfortunately those did not exist.

In the first place, it was not Haruyuki who wished to join a club, instead Takumu was today's main focus.

When he neared the martial arts gym, from inside already came echoes of discrete cheering, and dry impact sounds that overwrote those. He took off his indoor shoes and put them in the bag he brought, then stepped onto the polished wooden floor.

In the line of not too many visitors, he spotted the familiar short-haired back of the head, and Haruyuki jogged near. Chiyuri who turned around, instantly pouted and complained in a small voice.

"Haru, you're late! Ta-kun has already finished one match!"

"Sorry. But it should have been an instant win, for the first match."

"Well, that is true."

He looked away from Chiyuri's puffed up face, and stood on tiptoes to look around, then in the line of kendo members sitting with defensive armor, he soon spotted his childhood friend with a strikingly cool appearance. He might have seen Haruyuki at the same time, as he made a small movement with his right hand.

After returning a slight nod, Haruyuki turned his attention towards the match area.

"Eaaaa!"

"Shieeee!"

Two slender members, vigorously attacked each other with their shinai. The high pitched fervor, and their straps being green, meant they were probably both 1st year students.

Today, is Umesato middle school kendo club all member participation tournament battle. In the name of selecting regular and semi-regular members, but it also seem to have the goal of allowing new members to bash the upperclassmen's power. Umesato middle school has an exclusive use dojo, so the kendo club is somewhat strong traditionally, and this year about ten people seem to have joined. In that, there was only one 2nd year new member, which is Takumu.

While Takumu personally wanted to devote all his time to Nega Nebulas, but Kuroyukihime strongly remonstrated that. "Don't mix all your real life with Brain Burst", after his worshiped «Master» told him that, the kendo that was always inside of Takumu was renewed, and he wanted to do it here as well, so this spring he finally handed in the club joining application form.

To Haruyuki's understanding, the reason Takumu invited Chiyuri and him to this tournament was to show his decision that: even if he lost, he would not use «Acceleration» in kendo again. That was also the reason why Haruyuki stepped into the sports territory that he was truly intimidated by.

"Body hit, winner decided!"

With the echo of the advising teacher's voice, Haruyuki's thoughts were interrupted.

After returning to the start line, one 1st year student who lowered his shinai, with undisguised chagrin and stumbling footsteps, returned to the line of members. On the other hand, the student that seemed to have won, turned his strikingly slender body around, and left the match area without a sound.

Haruyuki who made a "Hmm" sound as he chased that slender back with his eyes, was interrupted by the teacher's voice that came next.

"Second round, first match! Red, Takagi. White, Mayuzumi!"

Then, two students stood up. Takagi was a 3rd year student, and Mayuzumi— Takumu, was of course 2nd year. They were about the same in height, but for body size, Takagi was much larger.

After bowing to each other, they stepped forward three steps to the starting line. Haruyuki stared at the shape of Takumu who held his shinai straight in the middle.

Thinking back, this was his first time seeing Takumu wearing a kendo uniform with his real eyes. Of course he had seen recordings of matches uploaded to the net, but the amount of information was definitely different from the live scene. The weight of the black shining shinai they use, the hardness of the uniforms, and he seem to even smell the scent of the defensive equipment, so he involuntarily swallowed.

For those kendo participants that did not change for over 100 years, the only differences were the more shiny face mask, and the Neuro Linker peeking out from under it.

For different kind of sports matches, it was not that long ago that they were allowed to participate while wearing a Neuro Linker.

The reason for that, was mainly to display points obtained and match time overlay in the view, but especially for kendo and fencing, it was used for effective judgement purpose. The few hundredths of a second difference being common impact timings, using the Neuro Linker senses feedback function, that was easily determined.

Naturally, during matches it is strictly checked for use of outside applications and Global Net connection. But, there is one super program that can easily stay undetected by this kind of surveillance. Without needing to be said, that is of course «Brain Burst».

During last year's summer Tokyo middle school kendo tournament, Takumu used «Acceleration» ability to win first place as a 1st year student. However for that reason he used up too much Burst Points, and was in danger of losing Brain Burst, so he was finally cornered into putting a virus into Chiyuri's Neuro Linker to rob points from Kuroyukihime— aka Black Lotus.

The regret for that action, even after Chiyuri and Kuroyukihime forgave him, right now he still had that stain inside of him.

However, returning to kendo gym like this, Takumu finally took a new step forward, Haruyuki felt it like that.

"Ta-ku~n! Knock him flying—!!"

While shrinking involuntarily from Chiyuri's unreserved cheer beside him, Haruyuki also put out as much sound as he could.

"Ta-Taku! Fight Hard!!"

Against the 3rd year Takagi-something opponent, Takumu won superbly after getting hit once.

He easily won the next quarter finals. And he also won the semi finals from judgement, and advanced to the finals.

However, the talk of the tournament was not Takumu, it was the 1st year student who advanced through the tournament with all two hit surprisingly strong wins.

"Gl...Glove hit! Winner decided!!"

The advisor's slightly higher sound, was overlayed with loud commotions. "There is an incredible 1st year" kind of rumor went through the Local Net and spread out, and even though it was after school, in about ten minutes, the area surrounding the match arena was almost full of students.

Not even showing that he noticed any of that, the 1st year student that returned to the starting line with a sliding walk, was the slender participant that Haruyuki saw in the first match. The number tag on him was marked with the name Noumi.

The height, was at most 155cm. The body structure was also small, and compared to the large built upperclassmen, it was like adult and child, where a match was unthinkable.

However, they could not hit him. The high speed hits from 3rd year students, almost unseen by Haruyuki's flesh eyes, were lightly dodged by his reaction as if he predicted them. Or he matched the hits with his own hits.

According to Haruyuki's vague understanding of kendo, before the opponent started attacking, or finished attacking, it's not a completion that can easily get in a hit that counts. The early one is called front of front, and the late one is call front of behind, that means, how fast you can react to the enemy attack, will determine the fight.

With that point in mind, it was as if the 1st year Noumi had an ability beyond the rest.

That's right— *Ability*.

"Final match!! Red, Noumi! White, Mayuzumi!"

With the advising teacher's sound, Noumi and Takumu advanced towards the match arena. Loud cheers rose from the gallery.

The relatively tall Takumu for a middle school student, and Noumi who could only look like a elementary school student, had close to 20cm difference in height. Even without thinking, the advantage is with Takumu. Their reach is totally different. But, thus far for opponents bigger than Noumi, he had won them all without taking a single hit.

The two bowed to each other, then stepped to the starting line holding their shinai, as most of the gallery who felt something was suddenly swallowed by silence. For Haruyuki, he could almost see blue white sparks coming out of the sword tips of the two facing each other.

"Begin!!"

—Right after that sound echo, two shouts and one impact sound crossed the wide kendo gym.

The first one to move was Takumu, as Haruyuki thought he saw. While standing he leaned forward, with an "Meeeen!" psyche as he attacked. With a barely within reach distance aiming for the opponent's head, an unforgiving blow. Noumi who has short reach could not counter attack, that was what it was supposed to be like.

However, quicker than Takumu's shinai could hit.

"Teeee!"

With that instant of psyche, Noumi's shinai hit Takumu's left glove. And a loud *Baan!* impact resounded, strong enough to even cause big ripples in the air.

Takumu tried to chase in for a collar hit, but that already gave Noumi enough time to raise his shinai high.

"Glove hit!"

With that sound and the rise of the red flag, finally the gallery and the over 30 members were in commotion. Beside Haruyuki, Chiyuri with eyes wide also said "Unbelievable!".

Haruyuki also felt that he could only say 'No way'.

The first one to move was Takumu, that was without doubt.

And then, he was attacking the face of the opponent that was barely within his own reach. During that attack, his glove was hit, how could that happen? That meant Noumi completely grasped the timing and path of Takumu's attack, and followed that prediction to place his shinai «ahead»— it could only logically be that way. Not front of front, or front of behind. It could only be said to be «front of middle».

Haruyuki forgot to even blink momentarily, and wondered if this was the real world or the virtual world.

If it was the virtual world— the electronic world where everything is decided by the brain's reaction speed, then that kind of reaction was possible. However for the real world, different kind of movements are restricted by physical laws. Inertia that holds the heavy body still, nerve transmission speed, muscle contraction speed and others put into consideration, seeing the attack then swinging the sword before the attack occurs is not possible, absolutely.

With just one exception that a limited number of people have for «ability».

While feeling his tightly held fists wet with sweat, Haruyuki stared at the two that again faced each other at the starting line.

"Second round!"

This time, it was a completely opposite developement than the first round. Takumu held his shinai horizontally, and faced the opponent. The eyes in his face mask were sharp as a blade, and his mouth was stiff.

On the other hand, Noumi who moved his sword tip up and down softly, did not seem to have any tension. Haruyuki could not see his face due to backlight, but there seem to be a thin smile on his lips.

Ten seconds. Twenty seconds.

Without either of them attacking, just time passed.

Haruyuki opened both eyes wide, and just continued concentrating all his nerves on Noumi's face.

If Haruyuki's reasoning, or bad premonition was correct, then at some point in time, Noumi's mouth will move slightly. In a sound volume that no one could hear, to sing a short command.

To the two that was still other than the clock moving *Tick tick*, the advising teacher finally took a deep breath.

However, when he was going to say "Wait", right before that—

Suddenly Noumi raised his shinai with not a terribly fast speed.

And then Haruyuki finally saw it. Noumi's mouth, slightly and quickly opened and closed.

—Without a doubt.

The Acceleration command.

The 1st year student called Noumi, the Neuro Linker on his neck contained the mysterious super application «Brain Burst», and he was a Burst Linker.

"DOOoooo!"

At the instant that Noumi raised his shinai, Takumu cut towards the opened up bosom.

At the same time Haruyuki also shouted in his mouth.

"Burst Link!"

With a *Vishiiii!* sound, the world was frozen in blue color.

With his 1000 time sped up senses, he saw Takumu's shinai slowly moved towards Noumi's trunk. No matter how you look at it, this attack could not possibly be dodged or defended by Noumi. That's right, even if he also «Accelerated» at that moment.

With his pink pig avatar, Haruyuki entered the match arena and peeked through the blue face mask of Noumi. Unfortunately it was beyond the range of the Social Camera, so the actual face could not be seen. But, just the smiling mouth was recreated by polygon.

While gazing at that face, Haruyuki used his left hand to start the Brain Burst console.

This 1st year student Noumi, how he managed to evade Haruyuki and Kuroyukihime's check after the school entrance ceremony was unknown. However right now, during the match his Neuro Linker must be connected to the Umesato middle school Local Net, then this Noumi's name must also appear on the matching list.

—*At this moment, I will «Duel» him.*

Haruyuki decided that while he waited for the list to refresh. Noumi clearly used Acceleration ability in the kendo club's match. Then probably, in the academic ability test next week he would also do that. However for Umesato middle school Burst Linkers, Haruyuki must teach him the "During tests and matches, «Acceleration» is not allowed" iron rule of Nega Nebulas. If necessary, he will use virtual fists.

After the searching finished, in the list, Silver Crow, Black Lotus, Cyan Pile, and then Lime Bell popped up on the display.

"What...!?"

While his right hand was extended towards the list, Haruyuki heavily panted.

Not there.

Noumi's name was not there. The list was same as that day before, with only four known Burst Linker names on it!

"Wh...y?"

He whispered while dumbfounded.

He did not think he was mistaken. Probably Takumu also thought that this Noumi was a Burst Linker, so he attacked without waiting in the first round. So he won't give Noumi any time to sing the Acceleration command.

No way, is this the reappearance of the backdoor program that Takumu used half year ago?, he thought like that for an instant, but soon negated

it. That program was used as a stepping stage for someone from outside, in the Global Net, to connect to.

However, at this moment, Noumi is actually in the Umesato middle school's kendo gym. Then without doubt he should be connected to the school Local Net, and thus should appear on the matching list, absolutely.

Haruyuki crossed the pig avatar's two short arms, hung his head down, and desperately turned this thinking wheels. It took him a full minute to sort out the three possibilities that could explain this situation.

1. Noumi is not a Burst Linker, but a kendo genius.
2. Noumi is a Burst Linker, but did not connect to the school Local Net.
3. Noumi is a Burst Linker, is connected to the Local Net, but can refuse to be shown on the matching list.

The truth should definitely be one of these. But, no matter which, unexplained parts remained.

While experiencing hard to say bad feelings and impatience, Haruyuki had a long sigh. Right now thinking more than that was pointless. He would need to discuss it later with Takumu and others.

Before he stopped the blue world and returned to his real body, Haruyuki stared at Noumi's shape once again.

He might be recklessly aiming for Takumu's face, with his shinai floating high above as he was about to jump. And Takumu's timing in his attack on the body, was perfect even in the untrained eye of Haruyuki.

Even if Noumi was a Burst Linker, or a kendo genius, or both, there was no longer anything he could do. Haruyuki wanted to look at Takumu getting a solid hit with his flesh eyes, so he shouted the Acceleration stop command while his eyes were wide open.

"Burst Out!"

From far away, the sounds of reality closed in. At the same time, color returned to the blue world. Takumu and Noumi's movements, slowly, slowly returned to normal speed—

"...!?"

And then Haruyuki, was again shocked for the umpteenth number of time in the past few minutes.

Noumi's body shifted right.

It could not be called the level of footwork. Noumi's foot, only the left tip was in contact with the match arena. Even so, with that one point as axis, the small body spun left like a figure skater, and slid right. From Takumu's shinai's chase, the body ran away, and escaped...

At that point, Haruyuki's senses' acceleration was fully canceled.

Takumu's shinai hit Noumi's body with a *slap*. But, it was too light.

Right after, Noumi's extended shinai that lashed out, caught Takumu's face mask with pin-point precision.

With a right foot step hard on the floor, he slashed down like that.

"NMEeaaa!!"

After that psyche, was a concentrated hit that could not be complained about.

Within the kendo gym that was returned to full silence, eventually the words "Face hit!" echoed.

"...Winner decided!!"

From Haruyuki's hand, the bag with his indoor shoes dropped down.

Chapter 5

Not able to prioritize the matter that should be considered first, Haruyuki continued to stare for a while at the small shrimp on a slice of pizza held in his right hand.

After deciding, he took a bite out of it, then raised his head and inquired.

"...Taku. That guy... Noumi is a Burst Linker right?"

"Suddenly facing it head on, huh?"

The right side of Takumu's mouth rose in a wry smile, as he too had bit into a slice of pizza at the same time.

8:30pm at night, they were in Haruyuki's room in his apartment. After Takumu finished his club activities, took a shower at his home, and came here; it was sort of late already.

As usual, Haruyuki's mother wouldn't be home till after midnight, but Takumu's mother allowing him to go to a friend's house for dinner, that would have been unthinkable while he was in elementary school. Haruyuki had not heard the details from Takumu about his transfer to Umesato middle school at the beginning of this year, but his parents seemed to be opposed to his decision.

The result, after many conditions Takumu himself put up, his parents finally allowed it, but of course Haruyuki did not know about the finer details. At the same time, he admired Takumu's struggle, with himself

completely being neglected by his parent, which one is more blessed as a child? He pondered on these random thoughts.

"Aa, eating those kinds of things again!!"

It was during his 2nd bite of pizza, when that sudden voice broke through his thoughts.

Chiyuri came straight in from the open door, put her right hand on her waist, and yelled again.

"Geesh, Haru, I always told you to learn to make your own dinner!"

"M-Made it."

"Just taking it out of the box and warming it up right!"

"P-Put it on a dish too."

"That can't be called cooking!"

She pointed her finger at the tip of Haruyuki's nose, then lifted the paper bag in her left hand high and held it out.

"I thought it would be like this, so I asked Mama to make lasagna. There, lower your head!"

—*You didn't make it yourself either!*

He thought like that, but with the scent of cooked cheese drifting from the bag, Haruyuki could only prostrate himself and say "Yeah yeah".

The lasagna that sat in the rectangular heat resistant dish, was a masterpiece made with a lot of Chiyuri Mama's special bologna sauce, with a taste that the similar Italian cooking of frozen pizza could not compare to. They moved to the living room, with Haruyuki having 40% of the total, Takumu and Chiyuri having 30% each, it did not take them even 15 minutes to finish all of it.

"Thanks for the food. Chi-chan's mother, should open a shop."

To the words said by a fully satisfied Takumu, Haruyuki also confirmed while nodding.

"Really. She can make Japanese, Western, and Chinese food."

"Aa, no go, no go. Mama's cooking, when it's not for Papa, she only puts out 50% effort."

After Chiyuri said that with a serious face, Haruyuki involuntarily looked down at the empty lasagna dish.

"Fo-For real? It's this delicious and yet it's just half the effort?"

"Ah, this is about 95% effort. Mama said that if it was for my future husband candidate, Gyaa, what did you make me say, I will knock you out!!"

With that sudden shout, and actually kicking Haruyuki's shin under the table, Chiyuri carried the stacked dishes and forks towards the kitchen.

While in agony, he exchanged slight wry smiles with Takumu, then Haruyuki cleared his throat and forcefully returned to their conversation topic.

"...So, about Noumi. That's right, what was the bottom part of his name?"

"I think it was Seiji. Spelled like this."

Takumu created a holo paper on top of the table, and smoothly moved his finger tip. The name that was written on the virtual paper with virtual pen was «征二»^[5].

"Hmm... does he have an older brother?"

After Haruyuki's murmur, Takumu also nodded after erasing the paper.

"Yeah. I checked the graduation album, and there was a student called «Noumi Yuuichi» three years above us. But his home address is encrypted that it could only be read by the same graduation year students, so it is not yet confirmed if he is Noumi's onii-san or not."

"Three years above? As far as age goes, that barely fulfills the first condition..."

With the first condition of a Burst Linker aptitude being «Wear a Neuro Linker right after birth» fulfilled, then he must be a child that was born in the year when the first Neuro Linkers became available in the market. That is to say, the «First generation», is in the current 2nd year high school— that is looking from Haruyuki's point of view, three years above.

"However, if that Yuuichi-shi^[6] is a Burst Linker, then he would be in the school with Master for one year. But, I never heard Master mention having any of her senpai being Burst Linkers."

"Is that so... that's right."

After mumbling "Uun", Haruyuki said as to change the topic.

"Well, let's leave that Yuuichi-shi alone. For now the problem is the 1st year Noumi... Taku, that guy... «Accelerated» during the match with you right? If it wasn't for that, then you would not have lost like that..."

Hearing that, the edge Takumu's mouth had largely distorted smile.

"Not really, I am not that great. It would not be strange that I lost after the 2nd match. Without acceleration, I am like that."

"That's not true. You were a lot stronger than the captain during the semi-final match!"

After Takumu's self deprecating speech, Haruyuki became irritated and retorted, then lowered his tone of voice.

"Instead of talking about that, what happened? I for sure saw Noumi sing something like the acceleration command."

After a long silence, Takumu lightly nodded.

"...Aa. I also saw it..."

"What~!!"

That high pitched shout, was from Chiyuri who returned to the living room after having finished washing dishes. She put the bottle of green tea and three glasses on the table roughly, then continued.

"No way, that guy is a Burst Linker too!?! Then, but, Haru and Ta-kun also said that this year there wasn't one in the 1st year!"

"There wasn't. That's why we are troubled."

After replying while pouting, Haruyuki scratched his head.

"I also accelerated at the instant when I thought that guy accelerated, and checked the matching list. But Noumi was not there... Taku, that guy was connected to the Local Net right?"

"He did. In the first place, if he did not, then he could not be in the match."

"I thought so... But, that kind of reaction without acceleration... that guy, Taku's first hit towards the face, and second hit towards the body seemed to be avoided as if he knew ahead of time. Especially the second hit, how to say it, it was as if he moved his real body while accelerating... That kind of thing, could not be possible."

"Ah."

Takumu made a strange sound, and Haruyuki also responded with "Huh?".

"Wh-What is it?"

"No... Haru, perhaps you did not know?"

—That way of speaking and expression, created a strong sense of Deja Vu in him.

"Wait a minute... Stop that, it's as if there is more «Accelerated World common knowledge» that I did not know about. Like the «Unlimited Neutral Field» and «Judgement Blow», while asking my face is red with embarrassment you know."

"Yeah. Then, this is the third time."

While snickering, Takumu seem to think for a bit, then he took one glass and filled it half way from the bottle of green tea.

Then he lifted his right hand up, and stared at the yellowish green colored liquid—

"...«Physical Burst»!!"

Right after the shout of a command that pulled at Haruyuki's memory from somewhere, Takumu threw the tea in the glass straight up.

"Wha..."

"Kyaa..."

Haruyuki and Chiyuri shouted in surprise at the same time, then right after, they were doubly shocked as their eyes opened wide.

From high in the air, the green tea that came down drawing small curved paths, was caught without loss in the glass held in Takumu's right hand!

His right hand moved slightly while matching the uneven liquid, going from top to bottom then jumping back up. One second later, with a *Thump*, the glass bottom landed on the table, with almost the same amount of tea that was poured from the bottle sat in it and swayed. The droplets that fell onto the tabletop, was just four drops.

"No way..."

After hearing that whisper from Chiyuri, Haruyuki finally remembered where he heard a command similar to the one now.

There was no way he could forget it. Half a year ago, to save Haruyuki from being hit by a runaway car, Kuroyukihime used the forbidden command «Physical Full Burst». It could only be used by level 9 Burst Linkers, with a cost of 99% of the user's Burst Points, its effect was to «Accelerate the real flesh body movement by 100 times».

The command Takumu used now, was without a doubt a lower ranked version. «Physical Burst» without the «Full». That should exist at an earlier level, he suspected.

"That means... it's an acceleration command while the consciousness remains in the flesh body?"

With Haruyuki's quiet question, Takumu slowly nodded with a serious face.

"That's right. The rate is 5 times, duration is 3 seconds, cost is 5 points. The acceleration does not include the physical body movement, but for avoiding the fighting opponent's attack, and getting in counter attack it's easy."

"If it is baseball, you can hit all home runs. I see... Noumi actually «Moved while accelerating» to avoid Taku's hit on his body..."

After adding that, Haruyuki blew out a breath.

He now understood the reason why Kuroyukihime did not teach him this command. Different from the basic command «Burst Link» that is required for duels, «Physical Burst» is only a function of acceleration ability that is needed for a user who desired fame or wished to be noticed. Above that, if you used it once there was no stopping, and if used often, he could imagine a fearful situation where many points would be used up.

At the edge of his lips, with a self deprecating smile as that situation was fully mixed in, Takumu said.

"Noumi Seiji is, exactly the same as I was last year. Everything. Winning matches with the power of acceleration, with the reparation of risk in existing duels, and using some kind of method to avoid detection. That's why I, even if I lost to that guy, have no right to say anything"

What broke that speech, was—

Chiyuri who was, not sure since when, standing behind Takumu. She knocked on his head with her knuckles.

To Takumu who dropped his glasses and had his mouth open wide, Chiyuri snorted then yelled.

"Wrong. It's not the same. Ta-kun wanting to win matches is for me right. Ta-kun, after winning always waved to me first, right?"

"Y...Yeah."

"But, it's different with that guy. That Noumi kid, did not look at anyone after the match. He just looked at himself and smiled. That's why Ta-kun is totally different!"

From the face of Chiyuri who said that frankly, Haruyuki moved his eyes to Takumu, and also gave a big nod.

"That's right, Taku. You are no longer your old self. More than anything, if that guy is a Burst Linker, then he's already committed reality intrusion on us. In this situation, we can't allow him to break our rule of no illegal use of acceleration ability in our base... no matter what, we have to find out why he does not appear on the matching list, and then «Duel» him as a slap on his head."

"Yeah! It's okay, no matter how you are beaten up, I will heal you up with gusto!"

"..."

With his eyebrows deeply wrinkled, Takumu hung his head for a while.

However, eventually his lips moved with the words "Thank you" leaking out lightly.

When he lifted his head, he had returned to his usual calm expression. After one nod, Takumu said in a low voice.

"...Understood. I will somehow try to check during club activity. You can leave that guy to me for now, Haru."

Chapter 6

However, two days passed without any noticeable changes to the situation.

Haruyuki was desperately trying to grasp the names, faces, and personalities of the students of 2nd year C class he was put in, so he did not have any extra time to think about the Noumi Seiji incident.

For Haruyuki who was uncomfortable dealing with other people from long before, and the only people who talked to him were bullies, he could not believe that Chiyuri soon became friendly with a few girls, and started eating lunch with them. Even Takumu who transferred into this school, had already mixed into the smart group, and during lunch break, while surrounded by somewhat difficult formula on the 3D display, talked about this and that.

Of course, if he ever said 'Let's eat lunch together' to those two, they would probably reject the invitations from their new friends, and eat lunch with Haruyuki. However, he absolutely did not want to depend on Chiyuri and Takumu like that.

Like he had in the accelerated world, he had to break his shell in the real world, and at least make new friends. Thinking like that, he desperately listened around trying to find male students with similar conversation topics, and hung around the local net, but everyone talked about sports, music, and fashion mostly, with him not able to hear even a single microsecond of conversation about games and anime.

—Well, I should try hard at it slowly. Even I have someone to eat lunch with. Furthermore, she's the school's most popular person.

Even though he encouraged himself with that, since that person is the student council vice president, she was extremely busy with the school field trip in a few days, and danced around different classes, so the continuing situation was that he could not even meet her in the net, much less during lunch time.

With that, the time when Haruyuki was finally able to speak to Kuroyukihime, was in the duel battlefield of the weekend «Territory Battle».

"Iii...Yaaa!"

In front of Haruyuki's view, the jet black avatar «Black Lotus»'s right leg, trailing a bluish purple color shaft of light, kicked straight up.

With a *Bang* sound, the close range type enemy was cut apart from the waist to the shoulder in a straight line, and was blown away while spinning around, then hit a far away building and stopped moving.

Looking up at the team winning display floating in his view, he saw that today their battle win ratio was over 80% and while feeling at ease, he walked towards his legion master.

"Hey, good work, Silver Crow. Cyan Pile."

"Good work!"

"Good work."

After Haruyuki, Cyan Pile's huge body appeared from the entrance of the fallen building nearby with a greeting, and then continued in a low voice.

"Sorry, I am on a break during club activities, so if you will excuse me. Master, in the field trip from tomorrow at Okinawa, have fun, and take care."

Watching Takumu leave with Burst Out command in a hurry after leaving those words, Kuroyukihime lightly laughed with 'fufu' sound.

"He became a proper kendo club member already. Did he immediately become a member of the regular lineup?"

"Ye...Yeah well. About that... Concerning that kendo club."

Haruyuki quickly glanced around, confirming that the enemy team of three, and the over ten members of the gallery had already disconnected, still continued in a low sound.

"There is still no proof, but... somehow, the new first year student that got in the regular lineup with Takumu, might be a Burst Linker..."

"...Say what?"

Haruyuki turned towards Black Lotus, who held up her two swords as if to cross her arms in front of her chest and narrowed her violet eyes to slits, and explained about the match the day before yesterday.

Even after the explanation was finished, Kuroyukihime continued to be silent for a few seconds. Eventually she glanced up, and whispered "That's still not close enough", as she leaned her elegant back on the nearby rubble, and Haruyuki also hesitantly sat near there.

"Noumi... Seiji huh. His brother Yuuichi's name, is not in my memory. Last year, and the year before, there was no Burst Linker amongst the upperclassmen. That's why even if that Yuuichi was Seiji's «parent», he had already lost Brain Burst when I entered Umesato middle school."

After chewing on Kuroyukihime's smoothly released words, Haruyuki mumbled "Yeah".

"That means... If Noumi Seiji is a Burst Linker, then his «parent» would be going to another school."

"That is rare, but it is not unheard of. Actually, it is the case for me. However before that... Is that for sure? About that first year student called Noumi «Accelerating» during matches."

"We have no proof. But... for other sports maybe, but this is kendo. For Taku who used «Physical Burst» command himself in kendo, I don't think he would be mistaken about that..."

"Fumu..."

Black Lotus who lightly nodded, leaked out a sigh there as if she had a wry smile.

"However, with that you learn of the existence of the physical acceleration command. I won't tell you not to use it, but becoming a ball sports hero with that is prohibited by Nega Nebulas."

"I-I won't use it! Paying 5 points for just 3 seconds, then it would be way better to dive into the «Unlimited Neutral Field» with 10 points. ...Instead of that, the problem is with the reason why Noumi did not appear on the matching list."

"For sure, it's hard to believe."

With both eyes narrowed, Kuroyukihime whispered.

"After the «Backdoor Program» incident half year ago, similar type of inside trick should not have been able to be used after the patch. If Noumi is a Burst Linker, and he is connected to the Umesato middle school local net, then he must absolutely be recorded in the matching list. If he was not on the list, then that means Noumi was not connected to the local net."

"B-But, while inside school, a student not connected to the local net, is that even possible? Furthermore during class, and in a kendo match too!"

"...To be truthful, that is not possible..."

To Haruyuki's rebuttal, the black mirror goggles swung sideways.

"If the school local net base server was invaded, or... No, no matter what that is way too risky. If it was discovered, then even for middle school, he

might be expelled. After all... with some kind of illegal program, he might be masking himself from other Burst Linkers..."

"That had happened before, right. I too, felt that is the most likely case... as well."

While lowering the silver helmeted head, Haruyuki answered quietly.

"However, even if that was the case, what would Noumi's goal be? If he really wanted to hide the fact that he is a Burst Linker, then using commands like «Physical Burst» would have the opposite effect. Actually due to that, we are already majorly suspicious of him. Even saying so, he should have complete grasp of our real information, but he had not used it to challenge us to «Duel». What does he really want to do?"

For Kuroyukihime's questions, of course Haruyuki could not answer them. After thinking for a bit, he said in an uncertain tone.

"...That, we have to find out why he does not appear on the list, and «Duel» him to ask about it, I think..."

"Well... Yeah. For Burst Linkers, nothing will start without duels. I want to begin the fight, but unfortunately from tomorrow on I will be away from Tokyo for a week... Hmm, maybe I should fake sickness and remain..."

"No, no way, don't do that!!"

Haruyuki hurried shouted, and shook both arms to push back Kuroyukihime's outrageous lines.

"Middle school field trip, isn't that once in a lifetime thing! Please go, we will deal with the Noumi incident somehow!!"

"Nn... is that so? But, don't be too unreasonable. That's right, have you decided what you would like for a gift?"

"Aa, that is... I will feel bad asking for something too bulky... so something like let me watch video or whatever that senpai takes..."

To be precise, video that has senpai in it.

To be more detailed, something like high definition video of senpai in a swimsuit.

Furthermore, add in the territory defense without the master reward, sent those through a 30cm direct connect cable.

Hearing the request that Haruyuki added a lot to inside his heart, Kuroyukihime tilted her head and said.

"What, are you fine with just that? Then, I will take lots and send them with email. Of all the Okinawa food that I eat during my vacation."

And then Kuroyukihime, on the next day, Sunday morning, boarded an airplane at Haneda with 120 Umesato middle school 3rd year students, and flew to the far southern part of the country.

Of course, it was still possible to contact her with voice call or full dive anytime, but thinking of a few thousand kilometers of physical distance

between them made Haruyuki feel uneasy, and he continued to roll around on his bed as he tried to sleep again after waking up.

—Why am I not in the same school year as that person.

If that was the case, then he might have been able to see her swimsuit with his own flesh-and-blood eyes during the field trip, and they would graduate together, going to the same school... no, being able to go the same high school or not might be a problem...

While he was thinking of many round and about things, he noticed the icon lit in the center of his view about receiving a voice call message. After realizing that was from Takumu, Haruyuki jumped up, and tapped the icon with his fingertip.

"Haru, good morning. About the Noumi incident, sorry for the late report. I wanted to somehow get hold of that guy's Neuro Linker to check if the Brain Burst program is there or not, but did not get a chance... I finally managed to get only a picture, I've attached it. This morning I also have club practice, and if I find out anything I will contact you, see you."

At the time the message replay was finished, the attached file icon lit up.

After noticing the large data size, he wrinkled his eyebrow, but soon understood the reason after opening the file. What was displayed, was the kendo club's new 1st year all member group photo.

The Neuro Linker contains a camera inside, so it is technically possible to take a static picture or video anytime. However, that is also much easier to take hidden pictures than old cell phones.

So right now, without permission through the net from the person in view, there is a function to prevent field of view screenshot of other people. —Of course, using strange methods to go around that limitations like Kuroyukihime is another thing altogether.

For Haruyuki and Takumu, their Neuro Linker knowledge and tricks were not of that level, so obtaining Noumi's facial picture could only be possible with waiting for a chance like a commemorative photo session. Haruyuki moved his eyes through the photo that was fully displayed in his view, and from the tags that float up and disappear one after another, eventually found the name tag «1st year A class, Noumi Seiji».

Noumi's true face— could only be said to have the features of a boy with a lot of youth remaining.

Round cut hair with light brown color, hanging down in length from the forehead. The eyes and nose were cute like a girl's, but the smile that floated on the lips, had a wild flavor fitting for a proper kendo club member.

"Are you... a Burst Linker...?"

He whispered that, but of course Noumi in the still photo did not reply.

Haruyuki carved the features of the very mysterious first year student in his brain, cleared the photo, then got down from his bed. He was thinking of going to Shinjuku or Shibuya area in the afternoon for «Duels», but changed that plan, and changed into his uniform to go to

school. If Takumu and Noumi are going to train in their club, something might happen.

In the kitchen, he put some ham and cheese in the stock up bread and ate it, left his mother that seem to be still sleeping a short message, then Haruyuki softly opened the door and went outside. Looking up at the bright blue sky above the high rise apartment made sparks twinkle in his view.

Going to school during days off, might be the first time since entering that school, after he thought about it.

He changed his shoes at the entrance, and glanced at the clock. His preparation and trip seem to have taken a lot of time, as it was already 12:15 pm noon. He was thinking of sending an email to check if Takumu was still here, but changed his mind after thinking that it was faster to go check directly.

The school on Sunday afternoon, was surprisingly quiet.

It was not that there was no one here. He could hear the sounds from soft baseball and track club in the grounds, and if he went to the cafeteria, he would find culture club students there.

But, the inside of the school building with lights turned off was dimly lit, and it was quiet all around, which gave Haruyuki a doubt that he was lost at a different place somewhere else.

Without really understanding why, he held his breath and walked in the first floor hallway, entering the sports building. He went past beside the gym with basketball shoes scraping the floor sounds, and headed towards the martial arts arena—

"...Shieaaa!"

That sharp psyche sound that entered his ears made him stop suddenly.

It was mixed in a few other people's sounds, but within the sounds that repeated with similar tempo, he accurately picked out Noumi's high and sharp sound that he heard from the other day.

Haruyuki became more stealthy, and left the hallway to go down to the gravel courtyard, then went forward a few meters towards the martial arts arena wall, and peeked into the window there.

It seemed like the whole club training had already ended, so there were only a few members remaining in the wide wooden floor arena. There all seemed to be first year students that must have been ordered by upperclassmen to remain training, as they swung their shinai while lined up. From Haruyuki's position, he could only see their backs, but near the right edge, one person with slender build and brown color mature style hair, was without a doubt Noumi Seiji.

Even looking with Haruyuki's eyes, he could see that compared to the other first years, Noumi's swings were overwhelmingly sharper, with actual ability behind it.

Haruyuki bit his lips and wondered why Noumi used acceleration ability to win matches when he had such degree of ability. Or did he have some sort of nonnegotiable circumstances? As Takumu's thought and conclusion?

At the time that Haruyuki leaked out a small breath, just Noumi suddenly stopped moving.

As Haruyuki shrunk his head while wondering if he had been found out for peeking, but it seemed that was not the case. While still with his back to Haruyuki, Noumi walked towards the wall, and started putting away his shinai.

"Hey Noumi, you haven't finished the number of swings."

While continuing to practice swinging, one first year student said that. With no reply to that, Noumi picked up his sports bag, and walked towards the arena exit as if he had already finished training. The club member that voiced the warning clicked his tongue, and the person beside him called out "It's different for Regular-sama".

Even hearing the blatant sarcasm, Noumi did not change his walking pace. If he left the arena while wearing his uniform, then Noumi would turn towards the side that Haruyuki was hiding at, so he hurried left the window side and went to hide behind a plant nearby.

Noumi did not seem to notice Haruyuki, walked towards the hallway and went straight ahead, then he disappeared behind the stairs heading

below the gym. Underground, was an even more out of the way location for Haruyuki in the school, which was a heated pool.

Does he want to go swimming now?, amazed, Haruyuki had that thought, but soon canceled that speculation. There should be shower rooms beside the pool. After sweating plenty from training, he might be going there before changing out of kendo uniform.

—Shower Room.

"...!"

Haruyuki took a sharp breath.

From look of the situation, the remaining first years should be continuing to practice swinging for a while. And in the surroundings, he could not see any other sports club students. That means Noumi Seiji, for a few minutes, would be completely alone.

Is this a chance? Why was Noumi able to refuse to be shown on the matching list, and why did he ignore other Burst Linkers going to the same school, isn't this a golden opportunity to ask him those?

Of course, he might feign ignorance. But for Noumi, he had already used «Physical Burst» command in front of Haruyuki and Takumu that he should have known were Burst Linkers. It seemed like he was purposely showing it to Takumu during a match. That, if he thought about it, was like an urge for contact— wasn't it?

Even though he still had doubts, Haruyuki chased after Noumi while checking the surroundings.

Right after entering the gym, the stairs going down were set against the side of the wall, and Haruyuki sneaked down it. Umesato middle school's swimming class is an elective course, and Haruyuki had no incentive to select that, so this is without hyperbole the first time he went down those stairs.

After taking a peek ahead of the left turn corner, he could no longer see Noumi's shape in the short corridor. On the left wall, he could see divided entrances for the shower plus changing rooms. He glanced at the ceiling to check, but the familiar black dome social camera did not exist. From this passage to the interior of the shower room, is beyond camera range.

After hesitating behind the cleaning equipment left at the corner for ten more seconds, Haruyuki made his decision and headed towards the shower room.

Looking on the wall at the entrances, he could see the relatively fresh markings, left side pink for female use, and right side blue for male use were indicated. After checking the direction of the steps, of course he went to the right side, and after a few steps he listened for sounds. Of course, if there were other students inside other than Noumi, then he would have to sadly retreat, but he could not hear any sounds of talking. He noticed that his palms had become wet with sweat, and wiped them on his pants.

—There's no particular need to be scared.

I am also a male student of this school. Then no one could blame me for going ahead. Just that, I want to ask about Noumi's intentions with only the two of us.

After whipping himself once more, Haruyuki stiffly walked ahead, and succeeded in invading the shower room.

The space was a lot wider than his expectations, with lockers lined up on the right wall. A long table was set in the center, and above it was left a school regulation sports bag. Many shower booths were set at the left wall in a line. The booths use smoke colored plastic panels to obscure view, and from one booth deep inside, he could hear water sound and see steam coming out of it. Other than that, no one else was there.

...Too late?

Haruyuki gave out a small sigh. While he was having a lot of doubts, Noumi had entered a booth. Truly, he did not have the guts to assault someone during a shower.

I should probably leave, while thinking that, he tried to back away— at that time.

On top of the long table, inside the half open sports bag, something flashed with reflection of light.

He could only see a part of it, but it had smooth curves, without a doubt was a Neuro Linker.

Normally, for security conscious people, they would put this device that could said to be another brain at a place out of sight. Maybe wearing it during showering, or at least put it in a locked locker. But, inside school, and furthermore was careless while alone, went without the turning of the mechanical key on a locker.

If this was the case, then the Neuro Linker might not even be powered off? If it was powered off, then starting it would require brain check, so nothing much could be done, but while it was left on standby state, if he connect to that, then he could directly search the memory area.

That's right, in January this year, that «Red King» Scarlet Rain connected to Haruyuki's mother's Neuro Linker, and left a fake email with this exact same method.

Of course, this is not allowed by moral or school rules. If the teachers found out that he secretly connected to another student's Neuro Linker, then being reprimanded would be the least of it.

However— even for the social camera net that usually do surveillance on the country's people, it did not cover the school toilet and shower room. And then, without video evidence, it is the school policy to ignore violation of school rules. Just like how Haruyuki was totally ignored while he was thoroughly beaten up and threatened by his classmates while outside of camera view range. Also, with direct connection to peek at the physical memory, not only could he find out whether Noumi was a Burst Linker, there is a high possibility that he could find the truth of why he did not appear on the matching list.

—Then, with about two seconds of thinking, Haruyuki made his decision.

While listening to the continuing echo of water sound in the shower booth, he held his breath and went near the bag, pulling it open slightly. Inside, on top of a neatly folded jersey, was a pale purple Neuro Linker. The indicator light blinked light blue, showing it was in standby mode.

He quickly connected the plug pulled from his pocket to his own Neuro Linker, then caught the other plug that was swinging in the air, and held it towards inside of the bag—

...No, wait.

This color. Purplish satin silver. As familiar as his own Neuro Linker, was not Noumi's.

While his thoughts stopped, Haruyuki froze while holding the plug, and in his ear came the creaking sound shower faucet being turned. The sound of water cut off.

In front of his face that was raised in a daze, the swing type panel door opened with a creak.

With a large towel from head to shoulders, Kurashima Chiyuri who came out, collided with Haruyuki's view, and four eyes opened wide.

This time, his frozen thought processes exploded with a boom, and for Haruyuki —what little saving grace for him in this situation— the focus of his eyes did not have the leisure to move downwards, and just continued

to stare at Chiyuri's face. It was the same for the other party, who had frozen while in the posture of drying her hair.

Eventually Haruyuki regained enough control to somehow move his mouth, and whispered in a sound that was almost not a voice.

"Chiyu... you, why in the boy's..."

At the same time, Chiyuri also blinked once and said.

"Haru. What are you doing in the girl's shower?"

—*Say what?*

And then, at that moment Haruyuki finally noticed that the basic color of the space surrounding them was not blue, but pink instead. The slip resistant floor, the slick wall and ceiling, and also the table in front of him, were all greyish pink colored.

...But, that is, there's no way!!

Haruyuki opened his eyes wide as he screamed inside his chest.

For sure, I went into the passage with the male marking. That display was not a wall panel, but a direct marking on the wall, so someone switching them as a prank was not possible. Or was it forcefully painted over with some kind of paint? No, there was not enough time for such large scale effort.

While Haruyuki was turning his thinking gears at full speed on various things, Chiyuri finally seem to have realized her current appearance.



As she glanced down at her body, her eyes became round, and the skin up to her ears became blood red. She covered as much of herself as she could with both hands, and raised her head again, taking a deep breath—

The loudest scream or burst of anger was going to be released, but right before that.

From the outside passage, the sounds of a few female students chatting as they approached were heard.

Instantly, Haruyuki belatedly realized that this situation could not be explained with just a mistake or a joke.

This, is a truly dangerous situation. If it was exposed to the school authorities, there would be suspension, or expulsion, no, before that— this incident might even involve the police.

Chiyuri might have arrived at that realization at the same time, and from her beet red face, all the blood left it at once. As the two looked at each other with tense faces, the female students' sounds were getting louder and louder.

Suddenly Chiyuri's extended right hand caught Haruyuki's necktie that was on his chest, and pushed him with the power of peremptory force into the shower booth she used a moment earlier. Chiyuri also entered inside, pushing Haruyuki against the wall with her back, and put her towel on top of the smoke colored door.

She took hold of the shower nozzle, set the touch panel temperature control all the way to the max of 60 degrees C, and turned the faucet fully

open. The spray of water that come out fiercely hit the right side wall. With the bursting hot water, the booth was soon covered with pure white steam.

"...Don't say a word, stay still!"

Right after hearing Chiyuri's whisper, in the shower room on the other side of one panel, he felt the presence of at least three girls entering.

"Ah gee, all sticky with sweat!"

"Yeah, I want to wear summer uniform already."

"I should at least change the Linker pad to mesh."

Probably, they were track and field club members like Chiyuri. With the voices, sounds of zippers being pulled down continued.

However Haruyuki of course did not have the room to imagine the outside scene, as he pressed his face against the wall, closed his eyes tight, and continued to stay quiet.

With about 90% of his brain taken over by panic, the remain 10% continued to think of the reason why it had become like this.

No matter what, he could not have mistaken the male and female use shower room markings. And since it was impossible to physically change the markings. Then, there was only one trick left.

Electronic markings in his view.

Overwriting his view with the Neuro Linker. With some kind of preset, to change the shower room markings from male to female, and female to male kind of fake picture was filled in with a program that was put in him. With that realization, he arrived, too late, at the thought of the markings that he saw a few minutes ago, the color tones were relatively fresh in the dim hallway. It was like it was giving off its own light.

It was still a mystery where and when that program got into his Neuro Linker, but the person who sent it was probably that guy.

Noumi Seiji.

Everything was Noumi's trap. That guy knew that Haruyuki was peeking at the kendo arena. Then he was lead to the shower room, where he invaded the female side due to reading the markings wrong, and therefore was plunged into this dangerous area. To fully remove Haruyuki, that is the Burst Linker «Silver Crow» from this Umesato middle school.

A fearfully vivid, ruthless, and relentless method.

Just like, the time that Kuroyukihime removed a student named Araya, or even beyond that.

"Ah, Chii? Are you still in there?"

Sudden, right on the other side of the swing door, a girl's voice called out.

Chiyuri's reply that was right beside his ear, Haruyuki listen while cowering in fear.

"Yeah, I was also covered with sweat."

"Isn't that right, since it's before the district qualifications, the teacher is over enthusiastic."

With a T-shirt, white shirt, and a blazer on top while in the high temperature steam, Haruyuki's whole body was already covered with sweat, so he could not feel the heat at all. Instead, his teeth were almost chattering due to the cold on his skin.

If right now, the female student playfully opened the partition, then not only Haruyuki, Chiyuri would also be in trouble. Even though she was the first peeking victim, she would also be punished the same as Haruyuki.

"Hey Chii, isn't the water too hot? There is way too much steam."

"Ah, it feels better when hot. It also promotes blood flow."

"Oh no, don't talk like my grandma."

She and the other students laughed with "Ahahaha". Chiyuri also laughed, but passing through her back that was in close contact with him, he could feel her muscular body tremble slightly.

...Sorry. Sorry. Forgive me. I was an idiot. If I didn't try something like fishing for the Neuro Linker in the bag, then something like this wouldn't have happened!

While screaming that in his heart, he ground his inner teeth to the limit—at that time.

A *creak* kind of door swing sound, made Haruyuki's body jerked in surprise.

However that was, the sound of a girl entering the booth beside. Then two more door open and close sounds came after, and shower water sounds all started.

A few seconds later, he felt that Chiyuri's body leave him momentarily to check outside.

She soon returned, and after turning towards Haruyuki's face, said with only her lips moving.

—*Right now, get out!*

Haruyuki held his breath, and nodded without even able to say thanks to Chiyuri's quick wit, then unsteadily stepped out of the booth.

He only glared at the exit, and desperately moved his tense body in a half bent posture one step, two step forward. If he fell here— or some other girls came in....

That kind of thinking almost made him faint, but miraculously his feet did not tangle, and Haruyuki succeeded in escaping from the shower room. After a short run past the U-shaped bend, he reached the separation area between the boy's and girl's sides, then leaned his lost strength back on the wall.

Strength left his legs, and he was going to sit down like that, but the sudden eruption of anger prevented that.

"...Bastard...!"

After that shout in his mouth, he lifted his head, and charged towards the actual male shower room on the opposite side of the hallway.

—However. In the pale bluish grey colored space, there was no one there. There was no sign of the shower booths being used. Probably, at the time of Haruyuki's intrusion into the girl's side, Noumi had already left.

"...Shit."

With that groan, Haruyuki hit the wall behind him with a *bang*.

About two hours later, in his apartment's 22nd floor's Kurashima house, in Chiyuri's room.

Haruyuki pushed his forehead directly onto the floor.

"Excuse me, sorry, my bad, really sorry!!"

Not sure how many times the words of apology, that he kept repeating.

The owner of the room, while sitting on the edge of the bed in her school uniform with arms crossed, continued to release intense killing intent. After letting in Haruyuki, who came visiting to apologize, she had not said anything, but that was even more fearful.

What he had done, was really too true to be funny level of atrocity, he had fully realized that— or supposed to. However, the true size of the shock on Chiyuri was something a male like Haruyuki could not fully share or understand.

Anyhow, her stark naked body, was seen at a very close distance of at most one meter.

Needless to say, this is already a bigger crime than last year's Takumu putting a virus in Chiyuri's Neuro Linker. It was different than going into the bath at the same time when they were young. Yes, everything was different. The collarbone that clearly stood out, the line of the greater pectoral muscle that connected her shoulder and chest, and the unexpectedly voluminous pure white—

"...You are remembering it, right."

That sudden low sound echo, made Haruyuki jumped about 1cm up while in his kneeling position.

"No, I haven't remembered, didn't remember!"

"You're lying, your ears are all red. Let me warn you, if you use that for something weird, then till your memory is gone, in that... what was it, oh yeah, «Unlimited Neutral Field», I will make you dive there. About 100 years worth."

Haruyuki jumped again with that.

"I-I won't use it, I won't!"

—To tell the truth, if Haruyuki was forced to use «Unlimited Burst» command here, and he was monitored for 1 hour like that, then over 40 days would have passed inside. The picture stored inside his brain would have been mostly distorted without a doubt.

However, over that time he would be chased around by other Burst Linkers or «Enemy», and other than loss of memory, he would have succumb to exhaustion, so Haruyuki desperately shook his head.

"Forgot it, super forgot it!"

"...Well, what kind of penance I want from Haru, I will think about that deeply later. That, I will put it on hold for now."

With a snorting sound from her nose, she threw something fluffy at Haruyuki's head. When he glanced up, he saw that it was a large doll cushion.

"You can stop kneeling, just sit."

"Ye...Yes."

With a nod, he picked up the cushion. He thought it was an elephant, but the nose was short, and there were three pairs making six legs.

"Wh-What's this?"

"It's a waterbear. The strongest living thing on earth... Hey, instead of that! The reason why you sneaked into the girl's shower was a virus's fault, and the person who put it there was some kid named Noumi, that talk... Is it true?"

Haruyuki hurriedly sat properly on top of the strange living thing, and kept nodding.

"Wi-Without a doubt. For sure I went into the male marked side shower. No matter what kind of goofy alien I am, I would not have mistaken pink and blue markings."

"But, when did he put that in you? You did not even talk to Noumi right?"

"Ye...Yeah."

He slowly nodded.

Actually, the route the virus was put into him was all a mystery. It would be contact with his Neuro Linker in the one week between the school entrance ceremony and today, but Haruyuki himself could not think of any chance for that.

If he was able to examine the virus itself, then he might be able to find the time that it was put there, but no matter how much he checked the physical memory, he could not discover any strange program. After looking at the Neuro Linker activity log, he found out that right after he entered the female shower room, a trace was left of an unknown file automatically erased. Since he did not remember doing that himself, then probably, the virus was activated and reached its goal— that meant after filling Haruyuki's view with those markings, it was set to self destruct.

"But then..."

Chiuri's thick eyebrows wrinkled, and she tilted her head.

"If he could do that, then why did he not totally destroy Haru's Neuro Linker OS, or erase the «Brain Burst» program? If his goal is to stop you from «duels», then wouldn't that be more effective?"

"No matter what, viruses cannot destroy system files. The most it could do is use functions for pranks. And also, for the Brain Burst program itself, once a person becomes a Burst Linker, he could download it from anyone else. Without that, upgrading the Linker would not be possible. Of course, you would have to put the core card in the new Linker..."

After that rebuttal, Haruyuki also wrinkled his face.

"No, but... to tell the truth, if he could use high level skill of replacing sight and sound, then instead of prank level, he could have used more wild methods... For example, like replacing the road crossing red signal with blue signal, and full sensory masking of the racing cars, then he could even kill me...?"

"Ki-Kill...?"

After that involuntary shout, Chiyuri held her mouth with her hand to prevent her mother that should be in the living room from noticing, and once again said.

"Kill, hey you, what are you saying!? Th-That's not game talk."

Here, Haruyuki could only weakly smile and shook his head.

"Brain Burst is a game but not a game. For guys like Noumi who use «Acceleration» for status in the real world, they will do anything to

protect their power. Think about it, if it was not you who came out of the shower booth there, and it was some other girl, then now I..."

"...Would be in the police station, right."

With a belated shiver on her back, Chiyuri whispered.

"But... Then, from now on, that Noumi guy would set more traps for us like that? Not only Haru... Ta-kun, Kuroyuki-senpai, and me also would be targeted...?"

"No, I won't let him behave like that."

Trying to sweep away Chiyuri's unease, Haruyuki interrupted with unaccustomed tone.

"After understanding that guy's attitude, we will no longer just wait and see. Maybe tomorrow, Taku and I will go after that guy. Though it's not my choice... if necessary, even with forced direct connection, we will expose the secret of why he did not appear on the matching list."

"...Haru..."

However, Chiyuri still looked depressed as she bit her lips, and her face lowered.

"I... somehow, don't like it. I feel something is wrong. It's just a game... but Haru, Ta-kun, and Noumi also, don't seem to be having fun at all."

"Th-That's not true."

He hurriedly shook his head, but at the same time thought that it was not unreasonable for her to think like that.

Since Chiyuri is a rare avatar, that is «Recovery Type», she had not even once experienced the normal «Duel». That field's width and detail, the battle's excitement and the exhilaration of winning, he wanted a lot to show her that quickly, but that would have to wait till Kuroyukihime returned to Tokyo one week later.

"At-At least for me, I changed after meeting Brain Burst... I also had a heart to heart talk with Taku, and I feel that my slavishness parameter had gone down a little..."

After hearing those non-connecting words, Chiyuri quickly blinked, then showed a smile with deep meaning.

"...Well, that might be true. If it was Haru from before, after seeing me naked, you would have surely ran away for a month without even apologizing to me."

Ugh.

At the end of those words, that problematic picture again reappeared inside his brain, so to hide his heated face, Haruyuki again kneeled down.

"Excuse me, sorry, my bad, really sorry!!"

"Stop that already!"

Again another cushion came flying, hitting his head.

Continuing after that, what a returned sharp tongue, Chiyuri announced in a low tone.

"Also, let me warn you. That shower room incident, if you tell Ta-kun, then this time for sure I will blow you away. I will also tell Kuroyuki-senpai afterward."

"Wha?"

Haruyuki suddenly froze.

To be truthful, he did not plan to leak this to Kuroyukihime, but he thought about reporting this to Takumu after this apology.

"Ta...Taku also?"

"Of course, what were you thinking of?!!"

While getting hit with the third cushion on his head, Haruyuki thought, *So it's matter of course....* But, if it's like that, how would he explain Noumi's attack? No, he should only report that he had been mislead to the female shower room, then he would not have to say anything about running into Chiyuri there.

While feeling somewhat shameful for keeping a secret from his best friend and comrade, Haruyuki took a deep breath, and shook that away.

Right now is not the time to drag that shower room incident out.

That, was a declaration of war from Noumi. In the war that was going to begin, they would need all of their concentration. And then if possible, he

would like to have this problem solved before Kuroyukihime returned from Okinawa. He would not want to expose that level 9 person to danger.

While listening to himself saying that, Haruyuki left the Kurashima house, and returned to his home two floors above.

However, Haruyuki was mistaken. He did not see that he was already in a situation with no way to turn around.

Before he realized that, the war had already begun, and it also ended.

Chapter 7

"It's game over, Arita-senpai... no, Silver Crow."

Those were the first words from Noumi Seiji when Haruyuki first met him.

The front entrance of Umesato middle school was on the east side, with the north side shaped like the top of 工 character. The north section was the special classes building, and the south section is the normal classes building, with two empty blocks divided by the sports building in the middle. The east block is the «Front Courtyard», and the west block is called the «Central Courtyard».

That central courtyard has many old camphor and oak trees stretching their branches profusely to all sides, so it is dim even at noon. Without any bench or grassy area, most students don't go near there, and it was not setup with social cameras.

When Haruyuki received the call to go there by Noumi using type email, it was right after the ending of the first class on Monday morning. After seeing at the end of the short message composed with small font saying "Come alone", Haruyuki looked at the back of Takumu that sat to the right front of him.

Haruyuki hadn't conveyed the shower room incident from yesterday to Takumu, after all.

It was fine to explain up till having a virus put into him, and rushing into the female side, but to explain how he managed to survive that, he would have to touch on the fact that he had encountered Chiyuri. But Chiyuri herself had forbidden him to speak about the incident, so no matter what he said to hide that would be a lie.

He did not want to lie to Takumu at all.

But he also understood why Chiyuri would not want to be shamed more than she already had been.

While he was moaning, due to being caught in the dilemma of the two opposing situations, that was when he got Noumi's message.

Unavoidably, Haruyuki decided that he would have to leave reporting to Takumu till after the direct meeting was over. Since the email clearly said to come alone. If Takumu was with him, Noumi might not appear.

The time specified was from the start of the 20 minute break between the 2nd and 3rd period class, which was when Haruyuki stood up from his seat and jumped out into the hallway. He went down the stairs, reclaimed his sneakers from the shoe box, and from the gravel path beside the gym, stepped into the central courtyard.

It was not a place with good memories for him. Since it was outside the social cameras' range, so while he was in first year, he was called here many times by groups of bullies. After being pushed, he would fall on his behind on top of the damp fallen leaves, with nothing else other than being miserable.

—But, that was all in the past. The me right now, is different from the me of those days.

While whispering that inside, he walked towards a big Mongolian oak standing in the center of the gloomy woods.

With a *crunch* small footstep sound, a human shadow appeared in that direction, and faced Haruyuki.

Haruyuki who thought that he would absolutely be the first to arrive, was slightly taken aback by the opponent at that moment, and his right foot took half a step back.

Seeing Noumi Seiji face to face, he noticed that he definitely had a very small build. Compared to Haruyuki who was somewhat shorter than the class average, he was another 10cm shorter. His limbs, trunk, and his dark grey Neuro Linker equipped neck was small like a child's. Their difference in weight were probably near two times.

His face too, was so childlike that you would mistake him for a girl. Haruyuki should have remembered this face from the photo that Takumu sent him, but for a moment, he doubted whether this really was the opponent that set that ruthless trap for him.

With clean cut soft looking hair waving, Noumi made a slight bow. On his eyes with long eyelashes, and his small mouth, a smile appeared—

"It's game over, Arita-senpai... no, Silver Crow."

Noumi Seiji said that.

"Wh...Wh-What?"

Being caught on the wrong foot, Haruyuki could only inquire with those words.

While still smiling, Noumi shook his delicate shoulders, and said once more.

"That is, winner decided. It's my win, senpai."

"Wi-Win what...?"

After taking a large breath, and revived his thought, Haruyuki glared at his opponent.

"We haven't had a «Duel» yet. That's because you used some kind of trick to not appear on the matching list."

"That is no longer necessary, the duel. Since I have this."

Noumi took his right hand out of his pocket, and lightly manipulated his virtual desktop. In Haruyuki's view, an accept file confirmation holo dialogue lit up.

"Please don't worry, I haven't put a virus or anything like that in it."

"..."

Even being told that, Haruyuki could not believe it immediately, so he glared at Noumi with doubtful eyes, and slowly asked.

"...You, how did you put a view masker into my Neuro Linker?"

"Hmm, you noticed that much, huh? Then, I will tell you the spoiler as a reward. The photo, it's the photograph! Mayuzumi-senpai sent it to you right?"

"Ph...Photograph?"

After being told, Haruyuki belatedly realized it. It was the kendo club first year student group photo that he got from Takumu yesterday. Right before he opened the file, he clearly remembered that the data size was relatively large.

"That, embedded in my nametag. The Neuro Linker's photo viewer, and the Augmented Reality information display use the same engine. Hiding a program that does a bit of view manipulation with it is easy."

Noumi explained while smiling, but for Haruyuki who finally had a bit of a grasp on programing, he did not think that was possible to make with just shallow skill level.

Probably Noumi is also similar to Kuroyukihime and «Red King» Niko, with an outer appearance not matching mental age level of veteran Burst Linker. He could not be underestimated for being younger.

While listening to his inner self saying so, Haruyuki this time started virus checkers other than the default ones, and fearfully accepted the file that Noumi sent over.

What was instantly sent over, seemed to be a short video. Before playing, he checked that there were no inconsistencies in the file size with the video quality and length. Then with stiff lips, he tapped the icon with his fingertip.

A rectangle replay window opened up fully in his view.

The video that was shown, was crisp even with a bit of noise. It was capturing a place that seem like a school hallway from a high viewpoint.

It seem to be underground, with no window on left and right sidewalls. The hallway did not seem to be too long, and on the left side of the wall right in front, was an entrance and exit with no door.

The inside of that area was soon split left and right, with two markings on the wall in between. Blue color for male use, and pink color for female use. That was—

The entrance to the shower rooms below the gym.

After realizing that, Haruyuki could clearly predict the scene that the video would show. At the same time, goose bumps rose on his two arms and back.

One second later, from the lower right portion of the view, a stubby male student came into the frame. Shaggy and poorly organized hair. Aluminum silver Neuro Linker.

After the boy reached the center of the video at the shower room entrance, he glanced back once at the direction of the camera. The round face that was captured from the front, was none other than Haruyuki.

Haruyuki that was in the video, after seeming to hesitate for a while— Then, with a trot, went to the right side path that had the female use marking.

"Ah, gee, you were too hasty, senpai!"

While his head became all white, and he stood there in a daze after the video replay finished, and Noumi's cheerful voice reached him.

"Normally, when you realize that it was all pink colored inside, you would have ran away! But still you never came out. I was wondering what to do."

Those words of Noumi were a mystery, but before that, he could not believe that this video itself could exist, and Haruyuki wrung out a dry sound.

"Y-You... this, how did you...? That pathway, should not have a place to hide..."

Hearing that, Noumi laughed as if it was actually funny, then shook his head sideways.

"That is why the recent young people are.... You made me want to say something like that. Do you think that the Neuro Linker is the only

portable device in the world? About ten years ago, this kind of thing was also for sale."

What he pulled out from his pocket, was a sleek device small enough to fit in his palm. The front side was fitted with a single lens.

"Well, for current digital cameras, there are only large diameter single lens reflex(SLR) ones. But, even with that, the resolution is plenty right? The one being captured is Arita-senpai, anyone can tell by looking. This, was set above the tool storage in that hallway."

While gazing at that toy like machine with a dumbfounded expression, Haruyuki inquired half automatically.

"...You... you going that far, just to remove me from this school...? No matter what you have to do, you are going to force me to be expelled?"

"No no, no way, not at all!"

With his narrow eyes wide open, Noumi shook his head as if he heard something foolish.

"Forcing senpai to be expelled, what benefit would it have for me? Anyway, if I corner you that far, then senpai might get desperate enough to attack me in the real world, and that would not pay. I just, for my middle school life from now on, want Arita-senpai to..."

There he paused, Noumi Seiji revealed an innocent— yet extreme cunning and coldness hidden inside kind of smile on his whole face.

"...become a loyal and hard working dog is all. To come and let me munch on burst points for my use everyday, as a smart pet dog."

"I won't let that happen."

—That sound, shook the oppressive atmosphere in the central courtyard.

Haruyuki was so startled that his back flinched, and Noumi while maintaining his smile, turned towards the direction of the sound.

Coming out of the woods, was Chiyuri with blazing eyes shining like a cat. Takumu was not with her. It seemed like she chased after Haruyuki by herself, and heard the conversation.

Chiyuri approached while crunching on the underbrush, then she faced Noumi at very close range, and released sharp words.

"I called Haru from the inside of the girl's shower room. If that video is made public, I will testify like that. The reason was, I fell and twisted my leg so I could not stand up, how about that? With that, there is a valid reason for Haru to enter the female side. Of course, there would be no suspension or expulsion from school."

After hearing that, Haruyuki forgot about his crisis, and opened his eyes wide in a daze.

Truly, that explanation had plenty of persuasive power. In the first place, if the reason was for peeking, then openly intruding from the front entrance is too absurd.

—However.

Even after Chiyuri closed her mouth, Noumi's thin smile did not disappear.

With leisurely movements he put away the small camera device, then his hands slowly came together, as if he was clapping and said.

"That is good, very good, Kurashima-senpai. For a baby chick that just became a Burst Linker."

"...Stop your bluffing please. Already, the video that you took, has no more effect."

"Hmm, don't bet on it. It's just an example..."

Noumi gestured as if acting, and held up one finger.

"...If, around this time, a hidden camera was discovered from the locker inside the female shower room... what would happen? There would be a big uproar in the school. Then, after the search for the offender begins, that previous video is uploaded to the local net... with that, would Kurashima-senpai's cover for Arita-senpai still work?"

"...!!!"

Haruyuki and Chiyuri took in a sharp breath at the same time.

"No way... You, went that far?"

At the same time that dry sound left his mouth.

Suddenly a red light flashed in front of his eyes. On the top of his view, in pretentious large Mincho font, [Emergency Notice] words scrolled past. Without the time to be surprised, a *Kinkon Kankoon* sounding chime echoed all over his hearing. Different from the bell for start of class, it's a tone charged with a sense of urgency. Continuing, a female synthetic voice sounded the announcement.

"From the Umesato middle school management department, this is an emergency notice. From the current time on, the areas below will be forbidden entry by all students. The students in those areas, please leave quickly. Repeat..."

Right after, displayed fully in his view, was a transparent 3D map of Umesato middle school. A section in the center, was dyed in bright red.

That was, the area above and below the gym. Of course, that also includes the female shower rooms.

Even after shrinking the picture to a small icon, and his view recovered, Haruyuki continued to stare at Noumi's face in a daze. The first year who just entered school, brightly said with unchanging smile.

"They finally discovered the camera, huh? Well, the shutter sound was set to ring at this time, so naturally they would."

Those words, were half overwritten by the commotion that came from all of the school buildings at the south side.

Chiyuri who took a step back, whispered in a sound volume that could almost not be heard.

"Are you... s-still sane? This...This large scale thing being done... just, for a game...?"

"It's me who wants to ask you, Kurashima-senpai. Brain Burst is «Just a game», do you really think like that...?"

At that moment, Haruyuki saw the sharp change in the quality of Noumi's bright smile up until then.

A corner of his mouth lifted up, and from his narrowed eyes, cold light was released. His tongue that poked out, licked his lower lip mockingly.

Towards Chiyuri who shivered, the blue ribbon on her chest.

Noumi's right hand extended snake like and casually grabbed it. Then violently pulled.

"Ah...!?"

As she let out a small scream, the young and strong voice was released sternly in front of Chiyuri's eyes, with both of their noses almost within touching distance.

"Don't use insolent words against me again. You can only follow my orders, if you want to save Arita-senpai. ...Even saying so, the level 1 Kurashima-senpai, won't be able to earn points so easily..."

Suddenly, Noumi slipped behind Chiyuri, holding his left arm strongly around and below her chest. He put his jaw on Chiyuri's right shoulder, and directly whispered into her ear.

"...You, will be my toy dog instead of a hunting dog. While I «Duel», be sure to be in the gallery and attend to me. Fufufu... a special use pet, even the «Six Kings» don't have one. Ah, don't worry, I don't think I will ask you to do anything in the real world. For the moment, that is."

After hearing Noumi's words, Haruyuki's temple had an intense pain. The *Creak Creak* strange sounds which he did not notice immediately, were his inner teeth grinding together.

"Y...You bastard."

With that groan, Haruyuki was going to take a step forward. At that moment.

"Who said you could move, dog... no, senpai."

With a cold smile, contemptuous words came flying.

"I said it at the beginning, that it's game over. There is no longer any choice left for senpai. Quietly, just sit there or something for a while."

After saying so, Noumi took out something small and long from his blazer pocket. Without having to look closer, Haruyuki soon understood that was an XSB cable. And then, it's purpose.

From behind, with his left arm holding Chiyuri's body tightly, Noumi held the small plug towards Chiyuri's neck.

A thin mist of tears covered Chiyuri's wide open eyes—

And then, when he saw that her pure white teeth were shaking in small chatters.

Inside of Haruyuki, a certain kind of sound snapped.

"...You bastarddd!!"

Before he realized that the shout was his, Haruyuki had kicked the wet ground. With his unaccustomed fist tightly held, he fiercely charged towards Noumi.

He had no idea what he was going to do right now.

With his flesh and blood fist, that is using violence to make an opponent succumb, destroy his pride, and make him obey. That was the lowest and worst act that Haruyuki himself painfully suffered, but that kind of sense had already been blown away. Only the urge of wanting to recklessly hit this far smaller than him boy called Noumi exist.

Even seeing Haruyuki huge body charging in—

Noumi's thin smile did not disappear.

He strongly pushed Chiyuri flying, making her roll on the grass. Then he lowered his waist, with his mouth slightly open.

At that moment, Haruyuki realized what his opponent was going to do.

It's «Acceleration». Furthermore, not the normal kind. With the consciousness remaining in the flesh, the 10 times sped up «Physical Acceleration».

The instant he realized that, Haruyuki at the same time as Noumi, instinctively shouted the command that he had never used before.

""Physical Burst!!""

With *UUUuuuu* sounds, all of the surrounding sounds' pitch lowered. And the color of the sunlight darkened.

And then, the density of the air increased.

It was like he was inside a colorless, transparent viscous liquid. It took a long time even to take a step forward. *Instead of acceleration, this is deceleration*, but that thought was soon dismissed. The effect of this command was that, the consciousness was accelerated 10 times while it remained in the real world. This meant that the speed of your flesh and blood body and everything else was lowered to 1/10.

Just one meter ahead, Noumi also moved, slow and sluggish. While the cold smile was pasted on his mouth, he held up his right fist. After that

fist reached above his shoulder, it slowly turned to move forward. Normally Haruyuki would not be able to see this punch path, but right now he could clearly predict it.

While in the sticky and heavy air, Haruyuki leaned his body to the right side. At the same time, his left fist came from below and thrust upwards. He would avoid Noumi's punch, and at the same time counter with a hit aiming for his stomach.

...Is this, really alright?

Bubbles of those kind of thoughts, floated up to the water surface of his heart and popped up with very small sounds.

However, Haruyuki forcefully sunk them back into the depths.

...This guy, just Noumi he would not forgive no matter what. Not just me, he also threatened Chiyuri, frightened her, and above that— what did he say? Toy dog?

Won't forgive. Absolutely.

Haruyuki carefully steadied his fist that was aiming to thrust into Noumi's right flank.

Due to that, he realized it too late.

Noumi's right straight, stopped after moving just a little, and in exchange, his left hook shot out.

—A feint!?

He hurriedly stepped down with his right leg, and tried to lean to the left side this time.

However, the center of mass that was leaned to the right side, could not be returned easily.

Noumi's left fist closed in on his face. At the same time, his body opened up, and the right flank that Haruyuki was aiming for moved far away.

The effort he put into correcting the path was not enough, and Haruyuki's fist just grazed past Noumi's blazer.

Right after, he felt the right side of his jaw touched by Noumi's fist.

What is with this punch? It doesn't hurt at all, upon the brief moment of that thought—

The force that passed through the thick layer of stored fat around Haruyuki's neck area, reached his jaw bone, then irresistible heaviness and hardness was conveyed by his nerves. Soft cell groups being destroyed, blood capillaries being broken, those kind of feelings, Haruyuki tasted them in 1/10 replay speed.

As if pushed by some kind of slow explosion like heat and pressure, Haruyuki started to fall to his left side. At the edge of his sideways view, Noumi who pulled his fist back, with that momentum not stopping, spun his body and held up his right leg.

With action movie like slow and perfect motion, Noumi let out a back spin kick, which Haruyuki could only look on helplessly.

The heel of the right leg that was extended straight out, touched his right flank, ate in, fearfully deep, and thrust in deeply—

As if a huge pole was stuck in his jiggly stomach, after tasting pain beyond imagination for many seconds, Haruyuki slowly floated into the air. At the edge of his view, blurred by tears, he saw Chiyuri's face, distorted by pain.

Before his back hit the ground, it took 7 more seconds.

For the remaining amount of «Physical Burst» command's subjective time of 30 seconds, as Haruyuki unsightly rolled, he could only withstand the pain that flared up.

With *uuuUUU* sounds, the pitch of the surrounding sounds returned, and at the same time, the air's thickness also disappeared.

"Gu... haa!"

After the acceleration of his consciousness stopped, he let out a sharp moan, and held his kicked stomach as he curled up. While repeating dry heaves, he saw Noumi's sneaker that approached after crunching on the underbrush.

"Ah, that's no good, senpai. Fights during physical acceleration are determined by reading ahead and using feints, you should have understood if you thought over it a little right? Or could it be that, you haven't even fought before? If it was like that, then I should have had no need to use the command. 5 points wasted."

Stopping right in front, he used his right foot on Haruyuki's shoulder, and kicked him into a face down position.

"There are 3 more minutes till the next class, huh? ...Well, we will make it in time. I will respond to your request, and be your opponent, Arita-senpai."

"Ah... ouch...?"

While enduring the sharp pain that finally lessened, Haruyuki moaned.

After doing so much already, what does he want now?

The answer to that question, was not with words, it was with the shining XSB plug that approached.

While stepping on Haruyuki's back with his left foot, Noumi bent over, and without any hesitation, thrust the plug into Haruyuki's Neuro Linker, then shouted.

"Burst Link!!"

Chapter 8

[HERE COMES A NEW CHALLENGER!!]

After the familiar sounds of acceleration, those words were displayed in his view, which Haruyuki gazed at while stunned.

«Duel»!? Why now!?

Up till now, Noumi had used some unknown method to block being registered on the matching list, and had kept on avoiding duels. So then, why at this time, and furthermore initiated a challenge himself?

Haruyuki whose thoughts were confused by all the happenings, could not immediately fathom Noumi's intentions. With his eyes opened wide, he could only look on as the world morphed into the «Duel stage» with dry seismic sounds.

The dense grove of trees lost all their fresh leaves at once, and morphed into deep black withered woods. The sky became darker and darker, sinking into the indigo of dusk.

The school building that stood on three sides, slowly decayed into skeletal ruins. From the grey colored ground, with 'Zubo zubo' sounds, numerous poles and boards grew out. No, not poles — grave markers. Mossy crosses and tombstones continued all the way to the edge of his view.

At the same time as the stage creation was completed, on his view's upper left and right side, two HP gauges extended. Under the left side bar, Haruyuki's duel avatar, «Silver Crow»'s name floated up. And then the right side —.

«Dusk Taker». Level 5.

He had never seen or heard of that name before. However, the level was unexpectedly high.

Probably, the person called Noumi, had always repeated the same thing. Set a trap for other Burst Linkers, obtain their weakness, then threaten them to «pay up» Burst Points. With that, he could level up without having to fight.

In front of Haruyuki who was grinding his teeth, finally the large [FIGHT!!] words burned up, and blew apart.

After seeing that, Haruyuki finally realized that he had been kneeling on the ground as he had before the acceleration. And then, someone was also stepping on his back.

"...!!"

He hurriedly bounced up, and took a large jump to distance himself. As he held his hands up and stared, in front was —.

A strange looking avatar stood there.

The silhouette was normal human shape. The size was small, not much different from Silver Crow. The face was also similar. The whole face was a

blank visor shape, with only reddish purple eyes sharply floating inside. The body and legs were slender like poles.

But, just the two arms, could only be called weird.

The right one was clearly machine type, with gears and shafts made up the thick arm with side armor, equipped with a brutal edge tool like a bolt clipper.

However, the left side, no matter how you look at it, was a living thing type. With fine rings on the outside, from a creature like arm, at the wrist, were three split up long tentacles.

It was a shape with no sense of unity, but the whole body color was as the «Dusk» name implied, a blackish purple. For its color circle affinity, it could be close or long range, but the color saturation was very low.

After his momentary observation was over, as Haruyuki carefully stood on guard, he quietly spit out the deduction that he had finally arrived at.

“...This means, you are going to drain my points right? To be taken down without resistance, for today’s «payment», is that what you want to say?”

Noumi — Dust Taker, staying silent for a while, continued to face Haruyuki with the dusk colored visor.

Eventually, his tentacle shaped arm jerked, and a sound with laughter was released.

“At the moment you became your duel avatar, you got more spirited, senpai. Even though in the real world you are still stepped on by me.”



Ignoring the sneer laughter, Haruyuki immediately retorted.

"You also, can you still show me all that composure? Already, I know of your real face and name, now also your avatar name and appearance. That, don't you think it's about the same deadly information as that previous video from in front of the shower room?"

"Is this what you mean to say? If that video is made public, in return that will cost my «Reality Intrusion», to make other Burst Linkers attack me."

"...Do I have any reason to hesitate?"

"Fufufu, scary. Well, I will admit that senpai also holds a card. But, to accept points, eventually this kind of «duel» is necessary. In this case... something else, I think I will accept from you."

The meaning of Noumi's words spoken with metallic effect, Haruyuki could not immediately understand.

"A... accept?"

"That's right. Senpai's, important thing. Well then... since we are in a stage, how about a fight? Since this is a direct connection duel, it is a bit lonely without the gallery."

After saying so, the blackish purple avatar held up his right hand cutter, and closed it once with a clank.

He could no longer understand Noumi's intentions.

However if it was a fight, he was not going to be beaten up silently. Without doubt, Haruyuki also held Noumi's «Reality» as a card, so if he made that public in the accelerated world, then Noumi won't be able to go about at ease with point hungry Burst Linkers going after him. Noumi would also want to avoid that.

If that was the case, then the winner could only be determined by an ordinary duel. Probably, Noumi will show overwhelming power like in the previous fist fight to steal Haruyuki's «important thing», which is his pride, in order to make him submit.

—— However.

“If you can also win easily in this world... try it, Noumi Seiji!!”

With that shout, Haruyuki held his fist, and kicked the ground all at once.

The battle field was the «Cemetery» stage. The main features are darkness, and sometimes arms of dead people grow from the ground to grab hold of dueler's feet.

The other side was one level higher, but for the duel fighting game «Brain Burst», it was not the same as online RPG where level difference was a deciding factor in a lost.

Indeed, level 1 and level 9's basic performance is too different to be overturned, but for 4 and 5, then the stage's attribute and compatibility could be said to be more important. And then for this Cemetery stage, Haruyuki has confidence that he had the absolute advantage.

"U... OO!"

While madly dashing in a straight line, he used his metallic fists and feet to pulverize the tombstones in his path like polystyrene foam. With the object destruction bonus, his blue special skill gauge started to slowly charge up.

Noumi — Dusk Taker, while he looked at Silver Crow who was charging in, did not seem to move at all. He lowered his waist with leisurely movement, held his right hand bolt clipper in front, and left hand tentacles behind.

"ChieEEEE!"

Similar to his kendo match, with a sharp psyche, Dusk Taker swung his left arm, when the distance between them was still more than five meters.

The three tentacles that became whip like, let out a 'Snap!' sound and extended straight forward.

However, Haruyuki had predicted that action. About any kind of game, had tentacles that could extend out.

He had to face the fairly fast speed of the sharp tips that shone as they came attacking, but they were still slower than bullets. He evaded the one aiming for his head by titling his head, and the remaining two he chop away, then Haruyuki came close to Dusk Taker.

"Shiee!"

The bolt clipper that was thrust out with that short sound, he lowered his body to let it pass by.

"...Raaa!"

He stepped down hard with his left leg, and the elbow that was thrust out, scored a direct hit on the enemy's jaw that he was aiming for. With the fierce impact sound and light effect explosion, the ground was lit up by bluish white light. The right side HP gauge decreased with a glop. That was the first hit.

To the greatly bent backwards, trying to hold his ground Noumi's undefended chest, Haruyuki pursued with a right middle kick hit.

"Guu..."

While Noumi groaned and staggered, Haruyuki continued the pursuit, from a left hook making him float up to a right high kick. With the slender body that could not be compared to his real world body, the light Silver Crow body flashed with lightning like speed, faithfully tracing the commands from Haruyuki's consciousness that was sent before the last one was over.

'How about that, did you see... did you see!!'

While releasing three showy kicks in the air like wire action in a Kung-fu movie, Haruyuki shouted inside his mind.

'—— You who kept running away from «duels» probably didn't know, for short range melee combat, there isn't anyone in my level range that

could win against me. To obtain this kind of speed, do you know how much hardship I went through... getting hit with virtual bullet many times and throwing up in the toilet, you probably don't know about that. For someone who use dirty information battle in the real world, with only that trying to reach the peak of «Brain Burst», guys like you...'

"Don't deserve to be called a Burst Linker!!"

The right straight that went out tracing laser like path, smashed into the blackish purple helmet, craving radial cracks into it.

After being blown away, crashed into a tombstone and laying still, Dusk Taker's health gauge was already decreased to about 30% remaining.

"...One more hit will finish this!"

After releasing those intense words, at this time Haruyuki finally put strength into his shoulder blades. At the same time as both arms were pulled to the other side, with a cutting like sharp metallic sound, large wings opened up.

The battle up till now, had completely filled his special skills gauge. If a dive kick from very high altitude scored, then Noumi's remaining HP would easily be blown away. Since the surroundings were tombstones as far as the eye could see, there was not a single structure to hide in.

He lowered his body, before leaving the ground in one breath — right before that.

Dusk Taker who was collapsed by a grave marker, his left arm moved without any previous motion, and three tentacles came flying like some different kind of living thing.

He managed to dodge the two that was going for his body, but one of them wrapped around his right wrist. However Haruyuki did not panic, he grabbed that and pulled, then kicked the ground as planned.

He floated at about 50cm up, and changed his two wings thrust from straight up to horizontal, going to pull Dusk Taker along. The opponent's legs dug in to resist, but he started carving grooves into the ground.

There were many enemies who tried to capture Silver Crow with whips or wires like this. However most of them were pulled into the air while they were linked, or broke up after being dragged on the ground. The thrust force that can be produced by Silver Crow's wings, could be said to be unlimited as long as his special skill gauge is not empty. Even the demonic Burst Linker, «Chrome Disaster» that had strength beyond «Kings», he won the tug of war against it.

"U... OO!"

At the same time as Haruyuki's psyche, white silver aura was sent out from the two wings. He would pull through the tombstones like that, breaking up Noumi's remaining HP with his avatar, he thought so without mercy ——

At that moment.

Dusk Taker's right hand huge cutter, closed on his own left elbow.

Without giving Haruyuki the time to be surprised, a 'Bachin!' unpleasant sound went out, and without any hesitation, that arm was cut apart.

With the tentacles' pull instantly disappeared, Haruyuki was forcefully thrown back behind as he spun around. After two, three bounds on the ground, and breaking numerous tombstones, he finally stopped.

After staring at the reddish black dusk sky in a daze for a bit, he hurriedly tried to jump up. However suddenly, from the surrounding ground bluish white skeletal arms thrust out, and grabbed hold of Haruyuki's limbs.

«Ensnare», the cemetery stage's topographic effect.

"Shit."

While cursing, he tried to shake them off, but the arms came up relentlessly and wrapped around him. Without any choice, he opened his wings after rolling on his back, trying to lift off straight up — however.

Right before his body floated up, a shadow that came flying with some kind of insect like movement, stepped on Haruyuki's right shoulder with a kick. He was again pushed back to the ground.

The one who stood there, was of course Dusk Taker. His HP gauge, after cutting his own left arm, was decreased to 20%. On the other hand, Haruyuki still had about 90% remaining, he did not think that this could be turned around, but the dusk avatar's whole body was strangely relaxed. His upper body slowly bend, with the blank helmet closing in on Haruyuki.

'After the Ensnare is gone, I will lift off and settle it.'

While thinking like that, Haruyuki quietly said.

"...You like stepping on someone so much."

"Fufu... speaking of that, senpai seem to like being stepped on."

After muttering that thinly, Noumi held up his half lacking left arm, and stared at the cut surface. Haruyuki who looked there as well, noticed that from the cut, three new tentacle tips seem to slowly poke out, and felt a bit psychologically disgusted.

"...Regrowth? Just like a lizard's tail."

"If it is like that, then it should be octopus or sea anemone. No, *the previous owner* said it was starfish."

"Wh... what?"

Turning to face Haruyuki who was not able to grasp the meaning and inquired —.

Noumi whispered with a sound that had more coldness in it.

"I said it right? That I will take senpai's important thing. That is..."

With a 'Clank', the bolt clipper's sharp tip held onto Haruyuki's left arm.

"Like this,"

Approaching to almost touching distance, from the center of Dusk Taker's helmet, lights overflowed from the two reddish purple eyes, and swirled.

"Meaning. — «Demonic Commandeer»."

...Special Skill!

Furthermore that skill name pronunciation, did not have any fighting spirit or exaltation, it was like it was spat out.

It was like, the need to call out the skill name to activate a special skill was being shunned.

The black light pillar that was released from Dusk Taker's whole face, scored a direct hit on Haruyuki's mirror helmet, and small rays reflected in all directions.

"Ku...!"

Haruyuki bite down on his teeth, preparing to endure the shock. Even though he took that at extremely close range, it was not possible for one attack to turn the difference in HP. After that skill finished, he planned to immediately counter attack, and calculated that timing — however.

His gauge was not decreasing.

Silver Crow's health gauge, continued to shine bright green, not even moving a little. There was no pain either. And he could feel no heat.

Even so, Dusk Taker's special skill gauge, from full charge condition, was decreasing at a fearsome rate. The released blackish purple vortex increased in force, and put a cold pressure on Haruyuki's face, but there was no change other than that.

—— No.

Suddenly, Haruyuki felt that there was something being sucked out from his whole body. When he realized that, was at the moment the enemy's special skill gauge was decreased to half, then the light's flow direction reversed. From Haruyuki's helmet, light gushed out like loose liquid spray, and was swallowed by Noumi's face.

A few seconds later, abruptly all the phenomena stopped.

The opponent's special skills gauge had been consumed to zero and exhausted. On the other hand, Haruyuki's was once again completely full. His HP gauge was not damaged at all, and Noumi's was also unchanged at less than 20%.

"...OOo!"

Haruyuki roared, and was going to fly up all at once. That skill was probably a delay type, then there was no point waiting for it to activate. He would fly Dusk Taker to very high altitude like this, and throw him falling down to ground to settle this ——

—— ...

Silence.

The cold silent air, covered the bottom of the field.

The dead people's arms that grasped his whole body had disappeared. Dusk Taker's left foot and right hand, were only lightly holding his shoulders. But still.

He could not fly.

No matter how much he put strength to his back, and concentrated his mind, the silver wings that made Silver Crow's body float and release him into the sky did not respond.

Haruyuki turned his head while dumbfounded, and peeked at his own shoulders.

They weren't there.

The normally reliable, beautifully shining ten white silver fins on the left and right side, had disappeared without a single trace.

Unable to understand the situation, Haruyuki who slowly turned his face back forward, saw the blackish purple avatar stood up without a sound.

He carelessly released Haruyuki from his bounds, and stepped back a few steps.

"...Fu, Fufu."

With childlike innocence, tenacity of someone who had years of experience and other things mixed in laughter, was thinly leaked out.

"Fufufu. Under that mask, should be deep shock right, senpai? Even so, maybe your proud gamer brain is thinking of this and that. What was that earlier skill... what happened to me. Being pompous is not my taste, so I will clearly tell you. It means..."

Similar to what Haruyuki did a few minutes ago, Noumi crossed both arms in front of his chest, and strained on both sides.

"This kind of thing."

'Slither.'

With that wet sound, two curved protrusions grew out of Dusk Taker's back, which Haruyuki could only stare at silently.

It stopped after sticking out about one meter, shook, and groaned —
While spraying out black mucus, it expanded widely to the left and right.
Wings.

The bone and flying membrane shape, was like a bat's, or a demon's kind of sinister silhouette, that darkly carved into the blood color dusk sky.

With wings flapping sound, in front of Haruyuki whose thought processes were all stopped, the small avatar slightly bounced. However he soon returned to the ground, and the purple helmet lightly tilted.

"Hey, this is pretty difficult... Not just physical action type command, it needs some other kind of input for control maybe."

'Flap flap'. With many repeated fierce wing flaps, the avatar increased in rise height.

"Oh, like this huh. This, will need practice before full control is possible."



While slowly swaying to the left and right, the avatar clearly left the ground, and started floating up. It was not a jump. It was also not being pulled up by a wire. This was —, this was.

"...No way."

From Haruyuki's mouth, a crack like sound leaked out.

"Lie. Lie."

'—— Up till now, pure «Flight Ability» being achieved, only one avatar that obtained it existed.'

'—— That person also said so right. Only me. Only I fly in this world. One and only, my power. My hope. My... everything.'

"No, it is the truth, this."

While hovering at about three meters high, Dusk Taker slowly opened both hands.

"My only special skill, «Demonic Commandeer», robs one of the opponent duel avatar's special skill, enhanced armament, or ability. That tentacle earlier, was taken from someone long ago. I don't use it often though. That meaning, do you understand? That means... the effective time, is unlimited. Of course, there is an upper limit to the number of stock."

—— Ability robbing. Forever effect.

That means, it's like this? The proof of existence of Silver Crow, those silver wings, was robbed by that blackish purple avatar, and will never return...?

"L... lieee! Return it... return ittt!!"

Haruyuki screamed as if to resist the bottomless sense of emptiness that suddenly assaulted him.

He bounced up, ran a few steps, then jumped up with all his strength. He extended his right hand, trying to grasp Noumi's foot.

"Hey."

With a slight lift up of that foot, Haruyuki's hand cut through the air. Fallen to the ground with metallic sounds, he was down to his hands and knees miserably. His limbs became cold, and his sensations went far away. He wanted to stand up again, but the avatar would not listen to his command.

"Senpai, senpai! Please don't be so depressed."

From high above, banter like, or comforting like words came falling down.

"I said it right, that I will take something important. Please be at ease, I will return it. On the day that senpai graduate from Umesato middle school, that is. Of course, every week till then, you will pay me a quota of points. It could be said to be two years of payment in installments, but even one non-payment... you know what would happen right?"

As if to show him, the wings that became grotesque was flapped hard once, then the coaxing voice continued.

"—— It's okay, with just that close range melee ability. With just normal skills, you forced me into danger and almost made me use a trick... so even without wings, that should be plenty. I guarantee it! Fufufu... Hahahahaha...!"

Haruyuki could not stop himself shivering all over his body.

This is not reality, this should not be happening. Robbing ability, this kind of unreasonable special skill should not be allowed in the system. This is... this is ——

"Unfair, cheat, you are thinking like that?"

With 'Kusu kusu' kind of throaty laughter, Noumi continued with relentless words.

"But, isn't that what everyone who dueled senpai up till now felt? Flight is unreasonable, is that even real, like that. Well... then, I will take this week's payment. Please stay still there... no, you can no longer move right?"

With sinister wing flapping sounds, he sensed that Noumi landed close by. However, Haruyuki no longer had a single shred of fighting spirit left.

With a work like feel, the large cutter closed on his left arm. The metallic cutting sound and sparks, the sharp pain conveyed by the nerves, Haruyuki faintly felt them like they were happening in some different world.

When the «duel» finished, and they returned to the real world, Noumi's foot left Haruyuki's back. While coiling the cable pulled from both Neuro Linkers, the small build first year student brightly said.

"Good work, Arita-senpai. With this, the rating in both the real world and accelerated world is finished. You at the lowest end, could only be used by me who is far above, right. ...Since this is the case, excuse me but for two years, please take care of me."

He lightly turned around, and continued after looking at Chiyuri who was still fallen down after being pushed.

"I am tired after that serious duel, so I will leave the show of Kurashima-senpai's avatar till next time. Please remember it, the promise of becoming my pet. That and... it need not be said, but this incident, please keep it secret from Mayuzumi-senpai and your boss, if you want your wings returned. I still need some preparation before settling with them. Then, excuse me."

A bowing farewell.

Noumi Seiji, with unruffled steps like when he appeared, left the central courtyard.

Haruyuki who was on all fours, pushed his body up with difficulty using shaking arms, and sat there heavily.

In this world, it was less than one minute after being punched and kicked by Noumi, but he could not feel much of his body's pain. His whole body

was soaked with sweat, but as if it became empty inside his body, he could only feel hollow coldness. With his teeth chattering, he could not even take a deep breath.

Chiyuri's shoulders were also shaking, but she eventually moved to the front of Haruyuki using her knees, and let out a raspy sound.

"...Haru... Why..., how come, it became, something like this... Why those... cruel things, had to be said..."

'It's only a game. Something for enjoyment.' The wide open eyes said that.

Haruyuki deeply hung his head, and pushed out a sound that was not a voice from his throat.

"Sorry, Chiyu. I am sorry to get you involved in this. Sorry for your scary memory. But, already, I... can't do anything. My wings, was taken by that guy. I, can no longer, fight. I no longer, have anything, nothing."

While muttering, drops leaked from both of his eyes, and flowed down his cheeks.

'I —— Arita Haruyuki / Silver Crow lost to Noumi Seiji / Dusk Taker in many ways. The information battle in the real world, the flesh body fist fight, and even the duel in the accelerated world, I was defeated to smithereens. And then —— robbed. Of everything.'

In the view where his tears fell in drops, two white kneecaps slowly approached.

'Will I be hit?', he momentary thought. 'Like usual, get rough with the shiftless, pathetic me, and be yelled at?'

However.

Suddenly, Chiyuri hugged Haruyuki's head close, and also buried her face in Haruyuki's shoulder.

"No... no, I don't like it, this... Broken... the hard, hard, work... returned to normal... all that effort...!"

The faint sobbing with painful sounds mixed in, towards Haruyuki's chest, clamped way deeper than the pain of a fist.

Chapter 9

That day, Haruyuki mostly could not remember how he got through his remaining classes, what he ate for lunch, or what path he took to return home.

When he became aware, he was laying on the bed in his own room in school uniform, staring at the ceiling in a daze.

His whole day of memories, were all covered with transparent cushioning material, and tumbled silently into darkness. As if wanting to say that everything was a dream.

‘—— That’s right, it was a dream. It could not be real.’ He whispered that without making a sound.

Of course, if he accelerate right now, pick any opponent from the matching list for a duel, then the truth of the situation would be clear. Whether there are wings on his back, he would know without looking.

However, he could not make himself actually confirm it.

He rolled onto his back, pulled the blanket from near his feet up to his shoulders, and thought to skip his usual special training at this time and sleep, at that moment.

Directly from his hearing, a light visitor chime sound echoed.

It was probably some package delivery for his mother, so he planned to ignore it, but inevitably a visitor picture displayed in a small window in his

view. That it was the severe face of his best friend — Takumu's shape that he saw there, made Haruyuki suddenly cover his head with the blanket.

Today, Takumu asked Haruyuki what happened at lunch and after school. What showed him that something happened, was the bruise at Haruyuki's mouth, and looking at Chiyuri's appearance should be more than clear enough.

Chiyuri seemed to have replied with just "Ask Haru", and then Haruyuki could only respond with "Nothing". He thought that telling him the truth or not would betray Takumu, and gave himself the excuse that he needed to think about it, thus kept running away all the way back home like that.

However it seem like Takumu did not want to back down. The again echoing chime seem to say, 'I will wait for hours till you come out', that stubborn intent was sent.

Haruyuki took a deep breath, raised his hand in half desperation mood, then push the open door button on the holo dialogue.

After he got up and stumbled out to the hallway, he was faced with Takumu who had just opened the door and arrived at the entrance. He prompted him to enter with his eyes.

The two of them silently went into the living room, and sat opposite each other at the table.

The silence continued for about another three minutes.

"...If you say that you can't talk about it no matter what, then I will no longer ask what happened."

After looking at the faint bruise remaining on the edge of Haruyuki's mouth, Takumu suddenly said so quietly.

He took off the smooth blue glasses, and looked Haruyuki straight in the eye.

"But, tell me just this one thing. Haru... what is Chi-chan to you. Why did she make that painful face, no, why did you leave the crying Chi-chan alone. No matter what happened, she is our... friend, best friend right, Haru."

Not being able to look at Takumu's eyes, Haruyuki swung his view to the lower left side.

'...Leave her alone? No!'

He shouted that inside his chest.

However, to resolve this situation where Chiyuri would also be arrested, he would have to totally conquer the existence known as Noumi Seiji. If he could not make him erase the video of the intrusion into the female shower room, and also defeat him in the accelerated world to make him return the wings, then not only would Haruyuki have to forever follow Noumi's command, Chiyuri would also have to as well with Haruyuki taken as hostage.

If he had calm judgement, then even if Noumi said not to, he should explain the whole incident.

However for Haruyuki, that he thoroughly stepped into Noumi's view masking program trap, rushed into the female shower room, and finally involved Chiyuri in it, he could not tell that to Takumu no matter what.

'—— Anyway, that program was put in the photograph you sent. If you had noticed that the file size was strange, then this would not have happened.'

Putting aside the fact that he also did not noticed it, he muttered that in his mind.

That was clearly shift the responsibility feeling but something Haruyuki did not want to say spit out from his mouth.

"Y... you too, what do you think of Chiyu. If you say that, then wouldn't it be better if you do something first?"

"...Want to. Want to, but... I."

'—— I, betrayed Chi-chan once.'

At the moment that he felt he heard words that did not become voice, Haruyuki hit the table with both hands with all his strength.

"Ta, Taku... you also, are the same!"

He roared with the sudden overwhelming feeling.

"Everytime, everytime, p, pulling back like that! Always dragging out old things, swallowing everything you want to say! You, do you like Chiyu at all! Do you want to date her once more, Taku!!"

"Aa, that's right, I like her! I think of her more than anyone else!!"

With a clanking chair groan, Takumu also shouted back.

"Because I like her, I want to let Chi-chan do as she desires! Until Chi-chan answer the girlfriend question, I will wait forever!"

"Wait!? Then, what will you do if Chiyu's answer isn't you!? What will you do if she pick someone other than you!?"

"That's all right, even that is fine!!"

With teeth grinding, while Takumu's two hands that were grabbing the edge of the table gave out screeching sounds, the continuing words from inside his throat came out shredded.

"If that, will make, Chi-chan happy. That opponent, even if it is... Haru, even you. I, with that, will be satisfied."

"...Are you seriously saying that, Taku."

With even to himself strangely flat voice leaking out, Haruyuki asked.

"Then... what? You mean to, give Chiyu, to me? Ah... or was it."

'No. No. I don't want to say it. I don't want to say something like this. I too, I too always, want you and Chiyu to go back to normal, just that,'

"Or was it, you, this time started to like senpai? So, if I and Chiyu got together, you can get senpai, that kind of scheme?"

— Always, hoped.

The heat and impact that appeared on his right cheek, Haruyuki accepted it half naturally.

After being hit by Takumu's left fist that reached over the table, Haruyuki was blown back with his chair, and fell down to the floor.

In his view that was twice covered by tears today, on the standing Takumu's face, Haruyuki saw that there were thread fine tears there.

"Haru... Haru."

Takumu's sound was cracked, and shaking.

"Haru, we no longer, have anything hidden right? Why... why did you not tell me. Why, did you not tell me the truth. I am... I am, that, untrustworthy a person?"

"Ta... Wr..."

Taku, Wrong.

However, any kind of sound beyond that, did not come out from Haruyuki's throat.

Could not say it.

If everything was cleared up, then Takumu would probably immediately have a direct conflict with Noumi. Then he would know. That Haruyuki, Silver Crow lost his wings. That he would not fly again.

No, that alone should be cleared up. For partners. For best friends.

However, Haruyuki could not say it. That he became far weaker than he was at level 1, that he no longer has the qualification to serve as Cyan Pile's partner, he could not confess that no matter what.

Takumu waited more than ten seconds for Haruyuki's words, but eventually his shoulders sagged, and he wiped his eyes with his right sleeve, then turned around behind.

"...The punch, sorry."

Quietly leaving those words behind, the tall best friend, slowly left the living room. After one echo of the door opening and closing sound, only silence remained afterwards.

How long had he been laying on the cold flooring?

When he realized it, the outside of the south facing window had already changed to a night scene.

While stopping all thought, Haruyuki slowly stood up, changed to suitable clothes in his room, then left from the entranceway. He used the elevator to go down to the first floor, and quickly walked through the entrance.

At the apartment site, it was bustling with families visiting the nearby shopping mall. After seeing one child tightly holding a game shop bag at chest level with face shining, he remembered that today a famous RPG series new game was put on sale.

'...Should I buy one too?'

Buy a package, rush back home and put it in the Neuro Linker, then intensely play it. But, current sales that use media, the size would be huge. Probably his local memory would not have enough empty space. Then, he could just erase another game. Something big, like that program... «Brain Burst».

That's right, it should be fine to quit that. Since eventually he will get bored of that game. Thinking back, he had been engrossed by that continually for half year already.

If he step down from the accelerated world, and was no longer a Burst Linker, then Noumi's interest in him would also disappear. The evidence video that he held would become worthless. Using Haruyuki as a hostage to threaten Chiyuri would no longer be possible.

At this point, isn't that the best choice? Of course, he would no longer able to help that person aiming for level 10, but, the avatar that could not fly anymore would no longer drag her down, or disappoint her.

'—— It would just return to what it was. Something that once obtained became lost, just that.'

'—— Is there any other reason for not stepping down, that still remain in me?'

A little girl that was passing by, looked up at Haruyuki with a mystified face.

It was there that Haruyuki first realized, while he was walking in the crowd of people, his face was soggy from crying.

Hurriedly using the parka sleeves to wipe his face, Haruyuki aimed for the apartment gate and started running.

To «duel» someone, somehow win, and earn enough points to pay Noumi. Meet the quota that was told, and one day have his wings returned.

If he fight in Suginami, then there was a chance that Takumu's spectator wait might be set to ON, and he might be called to the field in the gallery, so to change area, Haruyuki walked to the Seven Ring road.

At the Kouenji overpass intersection bus stop, he thought a bit about taking the inside or outside circle bus, then went to wait at the one going to Shibuya. To the north, Nakano and Nerima was the Red legion, «Prominence»'s territory, and he did not feel like facing its leader, Scarlet Rain.

A spherical EV bus with lots of wheels stopped, and Haruyuki stepped onto the boarding ramp. At the edge of his view, his electronic money balance was lowered by the bus fare with a clinking sound.

He pushed his body into an empty seat at the side, then while looking at the night scene, absent mindedly thought.

—— The total number of Burst Linkers is about 1000 people. Most of them is in this Tokyo area, Haruyuki was told that.

However, the total number of people —— that means from when the «Brain Burst» program appeared on the network till today, in the seven and half years, the total number of people that obtained acceleration ability, and how many lost it, he did not know that much.

Those who used to be Burst Linkers, what would they be feeling now. Biting their lip in regret, or just fond memories —— or maybe shaking their body in resentment?

'If it was me', Haruyuki imagined it.

'If I lost all the points, and was caught by forced uninstall, would I be able to think of it as just a «Game Ending»? Even though my wings that could be said to be my proof of existence was robbed, I am still hanging on to being a Burst Linker like this.'

No, he would absolutely not be able to forget it soon. He would probably struggle here and there trying to obtain Brain Burst once again.

And then —— there would for sure be people who think about «after that». With high anger and disappointment, there should be someone who thought of bringing the accelerated world itself down with them. Kuroyukihime had explained to him that, as children with no physical evidence, they would not be believed, but was it really like that? If the

mass media and police received many of that kind of report, even adults would begin an investigation?

How did «Brain Burst», for over seven years, continued to be this perfectly concealed...? And then, what would be the intent of the program creator for making this kind of situation...?

While thinking about those in half escapist way, the bus took a left on Koushu Road and entered Shibuya, the Green legion's territory.

Not being able to be challenged while in the legion control territory, that privilege should have been canceled at this time. Haruyuki — Silver Crow's name will be recorded on the matching list, and could be intruded upon anytime.

...Anyone is fine.

Haruyuki closed his eyes, and leaned his body deeply back on the seat to wait for that moment. Silver Crow was already just a «Weak to beating close range type». Ranged, Contact, Indirect, with not a single opponent he had advantage against.

8pm at night, even though it was a weekday, this was a busy «duel» time range, so just 30 seconds later, the thunder like acceleration sound echoed in his hearing.

Haruyuki who was put into the darkness, transformed into his duel avatar and dropped a short distance down, then stepped onto the ground.

After all the first thing he checked was his back, but there was not a shadow or shape of the metallic wings. After closing his eyes tight once, he started looking around.

It was the same Koushu Road, but the cars that lined the street, including the bus he rode on, had disappeared. The road surface was cracked, collapsed, and there were rubble mountains here and there.

While he thought that this was the «End of Century» stage, Haruyuki avoided the look from the ranks of gallery on top of the surrounding ruin buildings, and looked downwards without even seeing his duel opponent's name. Just like that, he waited in the middle of the wide road. The guide cursor that showed the enemy direction, shook while pointing east.

Eventually —— from the deep darkness, a 'DoKo DoKo' kind of bold motor sound was heard.

For a machine type armament, it was approaching at a very fast speed. That meant it was a moving force type, then this sound should be from an old style internal combustion engine, which not many Burst Linkers own...

Thinking up to that point, Haruyuki finally raised his head.

'Sparkle!' kind of round headlight shot into his eyes. With front and back brake rotors giving out red sparks, the American bike that did a showy spin turn, stopped with its chrome parts reflecting the surrounding bonfires.

"Hey hey hee — y!!"

The skull faced rider that swagger in the seat, pointed index finger from both hands straight at Haruyuki.

Even without looking at the name displayed in the upper right of his view, the old familiar bike user that appeared, was without a doubt «Ash Roller». That meant the stage and opponent was exactly the same as half year ago, in his first accelerated duel after being reborn.

"Mega longtime huh, YOU! Oh, fell in love with me and came all the way to Bitter Valley huh, YOOOOU!?"

"...Huh?"

Being taken aback, Haruyuki forgot about greeting and returned an inquiry.

"Bi, Bitter Valley, what is that?"

"Hey hey heey, know it, understand it! It is Yashibu of course, Yashibu!"

"..."

After thinking for about another second, Haruyuki finally guessed that it was Shibuya.

"...Umm, Ash-san. Bitter is not «渋い(Shibui)», it's «苦い(Nigai)» I think... Then that would not be Shibuya, it would be Nigaiya."

"...For real?"

"...For real."

Being pulled along by Ash Roller's mood, even though he could not be anymore depressed, Haruyuki made the correction, and from the buildings surrounding the road, laughter from the gallery boiled over. Ash Roller looked up at them, and shook his middle finger from both hands.

"Don't LOL, Ma —— n! I will soon knock you away, wait for it!!"

The skull face soon returned to Haruyuki, and in a low sound.

"...So, what's Shibui in English?"

"Th, that is... Rough, I think."

"I see. That should be Rough Valley huh. ...Hey, that kind of thing, doesn't matter!!"

"Y, you asked..."

"Quiet Shut Up! Having a bit more total wins, don't be so full of yourself, YOU! Look at this and tremble!!"

With that sound, he pushed the button on the side of the handle, and from the mysterious tubes equipped on both sides of the front fork, evil looking red cone faces peeked out. 'No way', he thought, no matter how you look at it, it could only be that, and Haruyuki whispered while dumbfounded.

"Th... those, missiles?"

"Yes right! Missiles, with homing attached, you flying bastard!"

"B, but, American bike with missiles, for design point... or aesthetic point, how about that...?"

"Say what! It's End of Century kind of mega co — ol!! Hey quickly go fly! Then you will cry!!"

While shouting that, Ash Roller finally noticed the anomaly with Silver Crow, and extended his head.

"...Hey, you, why is your wings closed up. The duel had already started, take it out already."

Haruyuki shook his head slightly, then quickly said.

"There was some kind of circumstance. Today, I will face you on the ground."

"...Hmm. Well, do as you like but... if you underestimate me, I will really make you cry, get it?"

With a quick glance to check the time, he opened the throttle once, then yelled in high pitch.

"Lets Daaa — nce!!"

With the rear tire giving out intense white smoke, Haruyuki stared at the bike that dashed to the right side.

For his recent duels with Ash Roller, the bike that could freely run on straight walls, was usually scored by Haruyuki's rapid descent attack kind

of development. But of course, he could no longer use that tactic. He could only dodge the charge, and try to damage him little by little from behind.

The bike made a sharp turn at a distance away, then charged in a straight line. He lowered his waist, and concentrated to find that trajectory.

With his gamer spirit, when the duel started his body and feelings moved in reaction, but of course he could not forget about Dusk Taker robbing away his wings. In his heart, there was still a huge hole that was opened up. Right now, Haruyuki felt that he was sticking his hand in that hole, trying to find if there was anything.

"...Kuo!"

Staying till almost the last moment, he jumped right with a psyche. The front wheel tread grazed his leg a little.

—— Here!

Haruyuki spun his body like that, then thrust a fist towards the rider.

However.

"TOOOoo!"

With that sound, the boot that suddenly flew in from the side, caught Haruyuki's helmet. While he was blown away, he saw standing on the seat, the shape of Ash Roller pulling back the leg he kicked out.

Soon he dropped his waist down, and accelerated again. After a turn in about 20 meters, he again stood up on the seat. Somehow he was controlling the accelerator with his right foot.

"See that, YOOOU! This is my new skill, V-twin fist!!"

Forget about the naming, that was a spectacular technique, and Haruyuki was impressed while standing up.

The huge bike being controlled like a surfboard with only two legs. Not only attacking with the vehicle body, the rider also has attack power, then the gap after dodging was filled.

'...This is, impossible huh.'

Haruyuki whispered that inside his chest.

If it was just a simple contest of hits, then Ash Roller with the bike's rush power has overwhelming advantage. Even if they hit each other, the damage Silver Crow take would be far higher. Trying to hang on anymore would be a waste of time.

After lowering both hands loosely, Haruyuki who just stood there was bounced flying by the bike's front tire.

He danced in the air like a stick, then crashed onto the road surface, and bounced two, three times. With a loud noise, he smashed into a rubble mountain, and finally stopped.

While unsightly laying there, Haruyuki thought in a daze with his wobbling head.

'...As I thought, it was empty inside the hole. I who lost the wings, have nothing remaining.'

From now on, he could only continue to go after and fight lower level, and furthermore better compatible Burst Linkers. Earning just a few points with each fight, and pay Noumi with them after saving up. Always for two years. Till the day that his wings were returned.

Suddenly, a 'Dorun' low engine rumble sounded right by his head.

'Hurry and finish me off', he thought that and waited, but the hard and hot tread attack did not come as seconds went by. In exchange, came a sound from a high place.

"That was so —— bad. Hey Crow, you, why not flying."

Haruyuki slightly raised his head, with the edge of his eye capturing the skull face, answered in a small sound volume that could not be heard by the gallery.

"...I can't fly. My wings are gone. That's why I can no longer, win in same level duels. Today was just to verify that. ...It's okay, to just finish me like this."

Again, only the 'DooDokooDoo' V-twin engine sound echoed.

The sound that eventually arrived, contained a calm that was not in Ash Roller thus far.

"...Finish it? What does that mean?"

"What else can it mean... sink that tire into me again and again, to finish the duel."

"Fuun. That means like this huh. You can no longer fly. So you can't win. So you want to throw the fight, and lay there without resisting."

His behavior, was not something a dueler should be praised for, Haruyuki also realized that. However, if he wrung his intelligence here, and win through some clever scheme, that would not have any meaning. It was not about leaving some kind of advantage for the continuous fights that will come. The important thing was just that, and he also understood that was not possible anymore. That was why —

"...Already, standing is useless."

After whispering that while laying down, Haruyuki waited for Ash Roller's condemnation.

However, what was returned, was even more quiet — could be said to be calmly controlled words.

"...Hey, do you remember? Long ago, you and my second «Duel»... the time when you, held up the rear end of my bike."

"..."

There was no way he could forget. That was Haruyuki's first victory, and a fight that needed to be commemorated. But Haruyuki did not say anything, not even a nod, he just waited for the continuation of the words.

"That was troublesome. With the rear up, no matter how much I stoked the bike did not move at all. That's why if all I did was sit there, then I would just eat headbutts from behind. That was really checkmate for me. But..."

With a flash of light from both eyes inside the helmet skull shield, Ash Roller let out a strained low voice.

"At that time, did I throw the fight? Give up like you now, and lost while being beat up?"

—— That was not it.

With most of his potential put into the «Enhanced Armament» that was the bike, the rider himself at that time was almost equal to a Burst Linker with zero fighting power. He left the seat, and started attacking the metallic armored Silver Crow with his flesh and blood body.

The result, Haruyuki beat up his opponent one sidedly, and won.

But, till his HP gauge was shaved to the last dot, Ash Roller did not give up. While yelling dirty words, he stood up till the moment of the KO punch, and continued to swing his fists.

"...No."

Haruyuki denied with a sound small enough that he himself could not hear.

At the same time, under his helmet, he felt that tears flowed from his eyes for however many times today.

"...But. But. I am... my wings, will no longer return. You won't understand. You who always continued to fight together with that bike."

Once again, long silence.

From the surrounding buildings, the gallery had indeed started a commotion. However without seeming to mind that, Ash Roller shook his head, and spit out something small.

"...Suck. Giga suck. No it's terra. Terra sucking bastard, you are. Becoming level 4 already, without knowing anything. ...At the time of our third «Duel», when I saw you suddenly flew, how much I... no, not just me. All the Burst Linkers that found out some guy who could fly appeared in this world, how much we had being blown away, how much at you..."

What was ahead did not come out of his mouth, instead he thrust his face forward, then the skull rider inquired with whispering sound.

"Hey. Right now, where are you?"

"...What?"

Not able to understand the sudden question, Haruyuki blinked his tear filled eyes.

"Where are you diving from, I am asking."

— Asking about the physical body location during a duel, was an improbable question normally. However somehow Haruyuki did not even think about the danger of reality intrusion at all, and answered while being engulfed.

"Ko... Koushu Road... riding the bus."

After a short tongue click curse, Ash Roller said something else that did not make sense.

"Then, return home immediately when this is over. Go to toilet then into bed, and dive «Above»."

"Ab... above...!?"

"Idiot, your voice is too loud, the gallery will hear it! As for above, is there anything else other than «Unlimited Neutral Field»? After you dive in, come to the crossing between Seven Ring Road and Inokashira Road. The dive time... let's see, 9pm just. Don't miss by even one minute."

After ordering the dazed Haruyuki like that, Ash Roller lifted up his body, and ran his finger in the air. In front of Haruyuki's eyes, a Draw Offer window opened.

"Come on, hurry up and acknowledge it."

Being pushed by that momentum, Haruyuki pressed the OK button without understanding.

After the «Duel» ended in a way that he could not think of, he returned to the real world inside the bus that was moving on a road, then Haruyuki immediately canceled his Global Net connection.

As the bus stopped at that moment, Haruyuki got off it by almost tumbling down the boarding ramp. After looking left and right, he ran to

the closest crosswalk, went to the opposite direction side of Koushu Road, and this time jumped onto a bus heading for Kouenji.

After collapsing into a seat, while breathing heavily, Haruyuki thought about Ash Roller's intentions.

—— Is he going to perform the last rites? In order to forever retire the worthless Silver Crow from the accelerated world, calling him to the Unlimited Neutral Field that has no instant logout, to rob all his points?

No way, that could not be possible. The degree of danger is same for the other side as well. There is no guarantee that Haruyuki would not appear with a large group of comrades. However if that is the case, then what goal —— .

"Well... whatever."

After muttering that, Haruyuki simply gave up thinking. Probably the enemy he fought the most in the accelerated world, but he never dislike Ash Roller himself. For that opponent to finish him off, it would be fine, he felt it like that.

After returning to the Kouenji overpass intersection bus stop, the time was already past 8:30pm. Haruyuki desperately ran home, used the toilet as told, drank some oolong tea, stuff a slice of the leftover pizza from yesterday into his mouth, then rolled into bed.

—— Maybe, this will become his last «acceleration».

Then, just once more, he wanted to see the person who invited him to this world —— Kuroyukihime. Even if he could not explain the situation, he wanted to exchange even just one word with her.

After that sudden thought, far away in Okinawa, Kuroyukihime would be busy with responsibility for the 120 students there, so he hesitated about calling her. Even so, while the time display on his view's edge neared 9pm, he waited while thinking if she would call him, but the call receive icon did not lit up even once.

When the digital number was at 8:59:58pm, Haruyuki shut his eyes tight, and took a deep breath, then whispered the command.

"...Unlimited Burst."

Chapter 10

The eternal world constructed above the Normal Duel Field, the Unlimited Neutral Field. This was only the second time that Haruyuki visited there, and the first time that he dived in by himself.

Under the pale yellow sky, the display of huge reddish rocks lined up told him that this was the «Wilderness» attribute. However this world has a system called «Transition», that changed the attribute in a certain amount of time. Thinking that he should get to the meeting point while the footing is still good, Haruyuki desperately ran across the dry ground.

No matter what kind of attribute, the accelerated world's geography itself is based on the real world Tokyo. The Seven Ring Road exist as a dry valley sandwiched between huge rock formations. He avoided the center of that, and selected to run under the shade of rocks, while being careful to check left and right.

In the Unlimited Neutral Field, there are monsters called «Enemy» created by the system, moving around and living there. Haruyuki had only seen the large type once, and had no experience fighting one. Individually they are stronger than high level Burst Linkers, so if he got attacked by them, then he would easily be slaughtered since he could no longer fly now.

He saw a number of cow and snake like ones moving slowly in nearby wastelands, but Haruyuki fortunately did not get targeted as he reached the border between Suginami and Shibuya, around Daitabashi.

Just in case, he searched the surrounding rock shades, but there did not seem to be a large number of people in hiding.

—— Instead of saying that.

At the moment he peeked in the crossing between two wide valleys, Haruyuki relaxed in a snap. On top of the American bike stopped right in the middle, leaning back with arms crossed, the very flashy skeletal helmet rider jumped into his eyes.

"Too —— late! You made me wait!!"

Seeing Haruyuki who approached, Ash Roller swung his right hand and shouted.

"S, sorry. I ran here..."

"You probably moved sneakily while being scared by Enemy. You don't have to worry, this kind of trunk road, only ultra large ones appear."

"Th, then, please tell me ahead of time! So, then what do you do when ultra large ones appear?"

"Cry and run away of course."

Haruyuki sighed under his mirror face, and shook his head to change the topic.

"...So, why did you call me out to this place? To continue that from before?"

"Fool, even if I win 10 points from you, diving used 10 points so I ain't no earnin' it back."

'That was double negative', he gave up correcting that, and Haruyuki opened both hands wide to stop him.

"Then, why?"

"Well, get on."

Being told quietly, made his jaw drop.

"...Huh?"

"Ride on the back. Helmet... you won't need one."

With 'Hihihi' laughter, he pointed to his back with his index finger, and while Haruyuki felt like an idiot for being wary of traps and whatnot, he got on the seat with unfamiliar movement.

"Okay, hold on tight. My machine's acceleration is violent, you see!!"

Around the 'ent' place, the throttle was opened fully, and the front wheel was raised up high, dangerously making Haruyuki almost fall off. Right after he hurriedly steadied himself with both hands, the deep black bike, while roaring a deep rumble, headed straight east — on Inokashira Road towards central Tokyo, and started riding fast.

"U... waa."

With the wind pressure hitting his face, and the acceleration power that made his whole body whimper, Haruyuki let out an awkward sound.

The engine's groan went high, and while he was wondering if this was the highest speed, the boot kicked the pedal into a higher gear, and the speed went higher. The reddish road surface melted into numerous streamlines, and the rocks approaching from in front were blown behind one after another.

"A... bit... too fast..."

He inquired half in a scream, but the returned reply was relaxed.

"Oh? Are you an idiot, this can't even go half as fast as your flight."

"B... but, a bike, like this."

Haruyuki had not even got on a electric scooter before in the real world. Of course he rode four wheel cars like the family car his parents owned before the divorce, or the taxi that he rode many times, but electric automobiles have no engine sound, and of course you cannot feel the wind from inside.

But this old style bike, even though a virtual world polygon object, seemed completely different from current vehicles that prioritize energy efficiency and safety.

This kind of substitute, was roaring noisily along the real world's roads just twenty years ago, which he completely could not believe. The rider wearing just a helmet with flesh body exposed, sitting there without a seatbelt or airbag.

"Th... this, how fast can it go!"

Since Haruyuki could not see the meter from his position, he shouted an inquiry, then again heard the slow response.

"This is not a racer type, so it can only put out around 200^[7]."

"Two... two hundred..."

After screaming 'If there is an accident I will dieee' in his brain, Haruyuki suddenly realized.

It was this kind of vehicle.

This machine, other than putting out speed, did not think of anything else. The engine that turns while exploding the valuable fossil fuel without thinking of waste, the complicated transmission, and the desperately thick tires, were all designed to just run fast. The image of this then assembled.

So to speak, it exists as a pure embodiment of the longing for speed.

As if to resist the destiny of living while stuck on the ground, moving at least a little faster, ignoring everything else. With that longing, a human without wings created this machine.

Haruyuki forgot about his fear, and turned his wide open eyes towards the light yellow sky.

Then he saw from high above, flying in a small flock, were Pterosaur like Enemy silhouettes.

'—— I.'

'I did not understand anything about the power of the wings I was given.'

'A tool for fighting, an advantage for winning, I had only thought of it like that. But those silver wings were not a level up obtained special skill, or enhanced armament bought with points. It was created by my heart, something that should be the foundation of the avatar named Silver Crow. As my salvation, longing, and hope.'

'I had forgotten about that, and... just saw it as a tool, so... that's why, for sure, it was that easily robbed from me. At this point... when did it become like this ——'

Realizing something so important as that.

So that Ash Roller right in front of him would not notice it, Haruyuki desperately swallowed his sobbing.

Already, he was no longer afraid of the 200km per hour speed. Instead of that, the engine that continue to desperately roar right under him, he thought it was a very admirable and reliable existence.

On the Inokashira Road, the bike curved south to avoid the city center, then again headed east.

When they entered the Minato district, Haruyuki finally asked the question that he should have asked at the start.

"Ah... where, are we going?"

"You can already see it. There."

Looking towards where the tilted helmet pointed, he saw that in between the rough standing huge rocks, there was a faint, long and slender silhouette ahead.

That was probably a steep rocky mountain, no, it was more like a «Tower». From the ground, it drew a line straight up, and extended far above into the sky.

To match the building at that place in the real world, Haruyuki thought and drew the south part of Tokyo in his brain, then after a few seconds finally arrived at the answer.

"Wha... th, that, is that the «Old Tokyo Tower»...?"

"Very yes."

Putting aside the weird English instant reply, he dug out his dim knowledge.

The Tokyo Tower in Minato, Shiba park that sent television signal to the area around the capital, its job was given to the «Tokyo Skytree» built in Sumida, Oshiage over thirty years ago.

It continued to operate as an observation deck for a long time after, but easily over 333 meter highrise buildings were constructed one after another in the Tokyo area, so near the beginning of 2030, its use as a sightseeing spot was also over. Right now even the elevator is stopped, and it is kept as a historic building that was forbidden entry.

Looking at the slowly nearing sharp tower, it seem like the old Tokyo tower exist in this Unlimited Neutral Field as a solid rock, with no internal reconstruction. That meant, standing alone in the wilderness, was a 300 meter high rock pillar.

"Th, that place, is something there?"

After he inquired in a daze, Ash Roller strangely mouthed 'Ah, Umm'.

"Nn, well, that, something. There is a person I want you to meet."

"Person...?"

—— Not «Guy», «Bastard», or «SOB»?

"Err, ah, I will say it right out, my «Parent»."

"Y, yes!?"

That shocked him to the bottom of his heart, and Haruyuki shouted.

"A, Ash-san's «Parent»...!? That means... mo, more spectacular? Bearded face, sunglasses, leather vest, with tattoos and beer belly."

"What do you bastard think I am."

Haruyuki wasn't sure why, but after that yell, his back trembled.

"...Let me tell you this, if you run your mouth like that while facing that person, regret will be the least of what you will have. That person already retired from the «Duel» front line for a long time, so you probably didn't know... long ago, the name «Astro» or «ICBM» would make you shake in fear."

The word from the strange ending sentences that Ash Roller said because of fear, Haruyuki repeated it in a whisper.

"I, ICBM...?"

"That's right. Ah, also, another one... «Icarus» was also a nickname."

"...Th, that does not seem to be too scary though."

"Well yea. That seem to be used after the retirement. That person was... before you appeared, **the Burst Linker closest to the sky in the accelerated world.**"

Almost at the same time as Haruyuki taking in a breath, the bike stopped with a cloud of dust.

In front of his eyes, from the dry reddish ground, a 90 degree triangle kind of straight rock pillar stood in there.

The diameter was about 20 meters. Almost completely circular shape, and for sure there was not something like stairs or entrance anywhere. The old Tokyo Tower that was entry forbidden in the real world, was probably recreated in this form.

He looked around trying to find that person called ICBM or Icarus, but could only see a turtle like silhouette moving slowly far away. 'It can't be', he inquired while thinking that.

"Err..., that person?"

"Are you an idiot, that is an Enemy. I am waiting for the wind to stop."

"Wi, wind?"

After being told, even though he did not notice it while riding fast on the bike, but to be sure, due to the «Wilderness» stage's geographical effect, somewhat strong winds were blowing. But that was not for a duel, so what was it for —.

The instant that he thought that. The wind that continued to howl without a break, suddenly stopped.

"All right, going! Hold Me Tight!!"

To Ash Roller's sudden shout, after Haruyuki was taken aback and wondered what he was saying, then he realized the reason for the instruction.

After opening the throttle to full, the bike's front wheel was brought up, and Haruyuki on reaction put his arms around Ash Roller's trunk. The engine roared in high pitch, and the rear wheel kicked up dust. The front wheel bumped into the straight rock wall with a thump, and without giving him time to think 'What, no way'.

The American bike with two person riding on it, started climbing the cliff that rose perpendicularly.

"Uwa... Uwawawawa!?"

And screamed 'That's unreasonable' inside his chest, while Haruyuki freshly predicted that the bike will do a backflip and fall off in the opposite direction.

However, as if the tires were stuck to the wall surface with some kind of mysterious attraction, the bike climbed the straight wall without any wobble. After five more seconds, he relaxed, and finally realized it.

This, was Ash Roller's ability, «Wall Surface Travel». If he thought about it, then he would remember seeing many times that bike was ridden and freely drove around building walls in duels. However, he did not know that even without a running start, it could climb the wall for such a long time. Saying it another way, right now Ash Roller was idly exposing the upper limit of his ability to Haruyuki who belongs to an enemy legion.

But, Haruyuki still could not grasp his true intent, and held his breath while staring at the top of the tower.

Indeed, it could not put out the same speed as on the ground, but the bike strongly climbed the wall in low gear rumble. Taking a glance downwards, he saw that the ground was far enough already to be so hazy that its color changed.

When he was flying with his own wings, this height was nothing to him, but right now the area around his stomach suddenly shrunk, and Haruyuki hurriedly returned his view. The top of the tower that he could finally see, seem to have a straight cut surface, with the edge drawing a beautiful arc in the yellow sky.

They would reach there in about ten seconds, then at that time, he felt that a wall of air came pushing from the left side in a howl.

"Shit! Wind Shiii —— it!!"

With the profane outburst, Ash Roller tilted the handle, and shifted the bike's path from the left side. The gust of wind that came blowing right after, relentlessly hit the side of the bike.

"Fly Hi —— igh!!"

"Gyaaaaaa!!"

As if riding on the wind, on top of the bike that flew straight up, Haruyuki and Ash Roller used all their strength to grasp the air like crawl swimming. Maybe that had some kind of effect, while the front shifted by inches, they reached the parabolic top, the bike's rear tire that fell down next, landed around 5cm from the tower's top edge.

"I, I am not riding this a second time! I will never ride something with less than four tires ever again!!"

Rolling off the seat, Haruyuki held the hard rock with both hands and legs firmly, then yelled that. As for Ash Roller, while still looking across from the bike, annoyingly shook his right index finger with a chit.

"Don't seem to understand, You. The bike is fun because it can fall."

"Earlier was not about just falling or whatever problem!"

After screaming that with shoulder shaking breath, Haruyuki shook his head, then he finally looked at the surroundings.

The top of the rock pillar that substitute for the old Tokyo Tower in the real world, became a 20 meter diameter round space almost exactly the same as the bottom.

However, the appearance was completely different from the lower part.

'Sky garden', those kind of words suddenly appeared in his brain. All over the area, soft looking grass shone fresh green color. There was a small spring in the center, and the sparkingly swaying water could not be any clearer.

In the center of the spring, a small floating island drifted — and then above it, Haruyuki saw something unexpected.

Wavering like a mirage, was a slowly spinning oval of blue light. It was a «Portal». From this Unlimited Neutral Field, the only method under your control for returning to the real world.

'Why in this place', he was surprised, but most portals were set at large train stations or tourist spots like landmark buildings. Then it existing in old Tokyo Tower might not be strange, but to use this portal, it would be someone like Ash Roller who could climb straight walls, or someone like Silver Crow who could fly, although that was not possible anymore.

After returning his view while tilting his head, he saw another unexpected thing on the garden's opposite side.

A home.

Small like a toy, a cute home, was built standing surrounded by numerous flowers. The walls were painted pure white, with the pointed roof being deep green. Along with the green ivy hugging the wall, that was a beautiful scene that could be mistaken for a page from a picture book.

While watching without words, suddenly that house's door opened with a slight 'creak' sound.

At that moment, beside him, Ash Roller quickly jumped down from the bike, and took a rigid standing position.

That would mean, the person who was coming out from there, would be Ash Roller's «Parent». Probably macho in leather like a Hell's Angel. It was somewhat a mismatch in dwelling, but he would not be surprised if a huge Harley came rumbling out of that door, Haruyuki decided resolutely.

However, in the end he was astonished from the bottom of his heart.

What rode out with 'squeak squeak' sounds, were for sure two wheels. But not in a line, they were side by side. The spoke was of ultra fine silver wires, and the tires were not rubber, but about 1cm wide silver wheels. What rode above those wheels, also made with silver wires, was an elegant chair.

It was a wheelchair. Without engine or muffler, a vehicle opposite of the rugged American bike.

And then the person sitting there, had the appearance that was 10,000 light years away from Haruyuki's expectation.

That was without doubt a duel avatar. Both arms on top of knees were smooth with hard looking bluish gloss, and the lowered face chin area also, was a sharp mask shape.

The reason he could not see anymore of the face, was that the avatar was wearing a wide brim hat. It was not like Chiyuri's avatar, «Lime Bell»'s witch like pointed hat, instead was a pure white bonnet type. The body was also covered with a similar white one piece dress.

'...What, a female person?'

As if to confirm Haruyuki's shock, the swaying wind shook the long hair under the hat. The hair that extended all the way to the waist, was a seem to draw you in clear blue — no, it was the color of a very clear autumn sky.

Again, with wheels squeaking, the wheelchair slowly started moving forward. Even so, the avatar's hands were still lowered on top of the knees. Somehow the wheelchair seem to be setup with some kind of self-propelled mechanism.

On the brick path that was laid surrounding the spring in the lawn, the wheelchair approached with slide like movement, and stopped at a place about two meters from them. The hat was lightly lifted up, and the avatar's true face was exposed. It was an appearance that you would never thought was «Parent Child» with the End of Century rider, Ash Roller, so Haruyuki stood still and stared at it.

Common to female type duel avatars, it was a mask shaped face with only lense type eyes fit on it. However, the face without nose or mouth, Haruyuki thought it was more beautiful than any similar type avatars he had seen before. Glowing well on her pale blue skin, the avatar's faint

madder red shinning jujube eyes first looked at Haruyuki, then Ash Roller next.

"It's been a long time, Ash. I now understand that you haven't forgotten about me, so I am happy."

"Lo, long time no see, mistress. Forgot, no way, nottt possible."

To Ash Roller who made the most respectful salutation, Haruyuki unfortunately did not have the room to correct him with 'Isn't it "Mega Longtime"?'. Since the sky color avatar again poured her gaze onto Haruyuki.

"...You are Silver Crow, right?"

After being called with the swaying wind like graceful voice, Haruyuki also immediately bowed his head. For some reason, he acutely felt that he had to do that.

"Ye, yes, nice to meet you. I am Silver Crow."

"Nice to meet you. My name is «Sky Raker». I am happy we met, Karasu^[8]-san."

Feeling that she glanced towards his shoulder area, Haruyuki suddenly shrunk. From her speech, this person already knew about Silver Crow, however that name known in the accelerated world by the silver wings — — flight ability had already disappeared.

Avoiding Sky Raker's gentle gaze that seem to be able to see through to inside of his head, Haruyuki deeply cowered.

However, after a bit of silence, hearing words issued by Ash Roller, made him forget his shame and looked back up.

"Then... see you mistress, I... I, will excuse myself here."

"Wha... Whatt!?"

Haruyuki quickly drew near the skeletal helmet rider that was returning to his bike.

"Go, going back you said... I, what am I going to do!"

"As if I would know."

"Would know, you said, but you brought me here!!"

"That, was because you were hesitant, depressed, and crying. Like that, the trouble of setting up my machine with missiles would have no chance to be shown..."

As if to remove non-existing mud from of his boots, Ash Roller scrapped their bottom on the stone pavement as he grumbled for a while, then suddenly changed his tone and said.

"...Hey, Crow. I don't know what kind of situation made you lost your wings, and you are probably thinking like this right now. Without flight you can't win, and fighting would be useless. However... in the accelerated world, how many Burst Linkers are there that could not fly even if they wanted to, have you thought about that?"

Taking a small breath, Haruyuki looked down at his feet on reaction. However, the sharp cutting words from Ash Roller still continued.

"And then, after a long time fighting «Duels», anything could happen. The loss of power also. But, your wings, are not something that after losing them should be immediately given up. If you fight lethargically like that, and finally just disappeared, then to the guys who kept looking up at your flying shape —— we would..."

As if he could not say the words ahead, Ash Roller fiercely kicked the ground with a thump.

While cowering, Haruyuki quietly whispered inside his chest.

'—— I too, don't want to give up. But, my wings... flying ability disappearing in system term, what else can I do.'

Slowly lifting up his lead like heavy head, he somehow managed to reply with blocked throat.

"...For sure, in the earlier «duel», my attitude was not good. But... that, and this situation, what kind of relation is there?"

"Err, ah, that... that is... like this..."

At that time, from behind, the silent till now Ash Roller's «Parent», Sky Raker's quiet sound echoed.

"Karasu-san. Ash is, thinking like this. That maybe I, can help you take back your wings."

"What."

Haruyuki's eyes opened wide, and his mouth also became round.

"My, my wings...? Help... you said... but, Ash-san is, Green legion's..."

"Ah that's right! Is that bad!!"

After putting his ass on the bike's seat with a thump, Ash Roller yelled.

"Listen, don't misunderstand! This is a loan! No, it's a tactic! To boost your favorability parameter up, so you will betray the Black legion kind of secret operation, you bastard! Uhii, I am, Mega Co —— ol!!"

To the skeletal rider, Ash Roller whose right middle finger was up and shaking, Sky Raker's quiet sound flew his way.

"That is vulgar, Ash."

"Yes, sorry, mistress. Th, then, here I will excuse myself and be excused!"

With a 'Burun!' engine loud roar, the American bike charged towards spring at the center of the yard, made a high jump at the shore then flew towards the shining blue portal ——

And disappeared.

While standing there in ultra amazement, Haruyuki somehow managed to quietly whisper.

"...Secret operation, you said... It's no good if you said it out..."

Hearing that, Sky Raker said in small laughter.

"Head, mouth, and looks are bad, but other than those a pretty good kid."

'—— Other than those, what would that be.'

After involuntarily thinking about that for a few seconds, Haruyuki for the moment pushed Ash Roller from his consciousness, and walked a few steps towards the silver wheelchair stopped at the shore of the spring.

A mountain of questions swirled inside his chest that he wanted to ask, and even with doubt about where to start, he hesitantly opened his mouth.

"Ah... that is... It was Ash-san who said it. That you are, «The person closest to the sky in accelerated world», he said..."

Then, Sky Raker's smile somehow became transparent, and nodded.

"What Ash said, about those wanting to but unable to fly. That would be me... or rather, it should be said that I could not fly. Since these hands, in the end, could not reach the sky."

The answer that he sort of expected, made Haruyuki close his eyes tight on reaction.

'—— Then, this person, instead of helping me, on the other hand has the right to hinder me.'

He whispered that inside his chest, however Haruyuki could not stop himself from jumping for the faint single line in front of his eyes.

While blinking, he looked up, and issued the next question with raspy sounds.

"Then..., is it true...? That you, can return my wings to normal..."

This time, the reply did not reach him immediately.

The metallic gloss sky color hair was lightly lifted up, and the serene avatar looked at Haruyuki for a while — then after that clearly said.

"That's impossible."

"Wha..."

"If a duel avatar lost something, then there is a reason that must be lost. This place, and I, do not have the means to cancel that reason."

"..."

With his faint hope instantly cut, Haruyuki's head lowered with heavy heart. However, right before his sight left, Sky Raker casually lifted the skirt of the white dress covering her body, and his eyes were startled out of his eye socket.

"Take a look."

What was there —, no, was not there, was what was supposed to be below the avatar's knees.

The slender thighs drawn with supple lines, were connected with round kneel joint parts. However, the shin part of the legs that should extend from there did not exist.

Since the avatar was riding a wheelchair, he should have thought that there was some problem with the legs. But, for what kind of reason, would the duel avatar's legs have disappeared?

For sure, during battles, for different kinds of reasons, parts loss due to damage was possible. For Haruyuki as well, he had numerous experiences of losing an arm or a leg during fierce fights. However, the parts loss damage were immediately canceled after the duel was over, and should have returned to brand new again in the next battlefield.

Haruyuki held his breath, without being able to look away, and invertible thought.

'Just maybe, Sky Raker also...? A Burst Linker with similar ability to Noumi that is Dusk Taker, forever robbed her leg...?'

However, the words that were issued next, denied that suspicion.

"I selected to cut them off myself."

"Wha...!?"

"I decided that I no longer needed legs, and asked someone to cut it, while understanding it was a move of huge arrogance, egotism, and madness. Afterwards, my two legs, no matter how many times I dived into the accelerated world, never returned. In other words... inside of me, even now the fire of madness burns, is what it means. As long as it is not extinguished, my legs will probably forever remain like this."

To the standing still Haruyuki, the auroral eyes stared at him, and Sky Raker quietly decided.

"Your wings are the same. Unless you face the reason for the loss once more, and overcome it, then they will never return."

Reason.

That means, Noumi/Dusk Taker's special skill, «Demonic Commandeer».

No, not that. It was the defeat itself. Unless Haruyuki can conquer Noumi Seiji in different fronts, and overcome the scar of defeat deeply carved in his heart, then he would never get back his wings. That was what it meant.

However, that was already absolutely impossible. The reason was, Haruyuki's only power which was the flight ability was lost, and Noumi who robbed it was flying freely now. He could not see any way to win.

To Haruyuki who involuntarily kneeled down onto the grass ——.

Sky Raker said something unexpected to him.

"No matter what you do in this garden will not return your wings, however, I did not say you can not fly, Karasu-san."

"Let's sit down to talk about the next part."

With those words, the automatic wheelchair started moving with squeaking sounds, so Haruyuki chased after her while majorly confused.

In the circular sky garden, at the East, West, South, and North edge, a white bench was setup. They were a type with no backrest, so could be sat on from any direction. Sky Raker stopped her wheelchair at the north bench facing outwards, so Haruyuki also hesitantly sat beside her. At the moment he raised his head, he was breathless from the superb view.

He could see all of the «Wilderness» attribute Tokyo city center 300 meters below.

The area around the civic center in Nagatacho became a huge ruin made up of red sandstones. In that valley, stone arches support the capital high above drawing an arc around.

Further away, he was drawn in by a remarkably vivid red palace's majesty. It was the imperial palace in the real world. No matter what kind of attribute stage, the sometimes graceful, other times full of ghastly feeling huge castle was always there.

'I wonder who lives there', as he idly thought that, suddenly Sky Raker broke the silence.

"I thought about meeting you once, Silver Crow."

"Wha... ah, th, thank you..."

He lowered his shoulders while mumbling. Seeing that appearance, as a warm smile feeling drifted by, the sky color avatar quietly continued.

"Seven years passed since the beginning of the accelerated world, «Flight type avatar» finally appeared. When I heard about you from Ash, I was

hugely shocked, and was also interested. What kind of soul... what kind of wounded spirit, could manifest power to cut off this world's huge gravity, I wondered."

"No, that.. so, sorry. My, my wounds, are really not something important."

Shrinking his body more, Haruyuki shook his head slightly.

"Fat in the real world, being bullied, and mopped around for a long time only... those kind of things, calling them wounds would be presumptuous, I recently thought."

He was having doubts about why he was saying those kind of things to a first met, and furthermore could be said to be near enemy force Burst Linker, still strangely words freely dripped from his mouth.

Hearing that, Sky Raker again smiled and shook her head sideways.

"After installation, the Brain Burst program that read the owner's consciousness for the duel avatar's resource, «Wounds of heart», does not always mean the strength of anger or hatred."

"Wha...? Th, that is, wound means, negative feelings right?"

"That's right, but not only that. Having large negative thought, for example a boiling kind of anger as a source, will without exception create a duel avatar whose power leans towards pure destructive power. For example, the huge disaster that spread through the accelerated world, that «Chrome Disaster»."

Hearing that name, Haruyuki took a sharp breath.

Seeing Disaster Armor, Chrome Disaster's fearsome attack power, had shaken him to the marrow of bone, and he saw it only a few months ago. For sure, that enhanced armament was stained with tremendous feelings of rage, he thought.

"...And then also, avatars that use grudges as a source obtain curse-like indirect attack power, and avatars made from despair in many cases hurt the self to damage the enemy, a kind of self destruct type. But, not all of the avatars have that kind of destructive power, which you already understand right?"

"...Yea."

It was exactly like what she said. Haruyuki's wings were not direct attack power, and Ash Roller's bike also. However, then, «Wounds of heart», what would it ——

"Wound, means lost. The hole in the heart from clipping off something important."

As if reading what was inside Haruyuki's chest, Sky Raker quietly answered.

"Holding the hollow hole, and having anger, resentment, despair —— or again reaching with ones' hand held out high. That choice determines the type of avatar."

"The hand... reaching out?"

"Yes. That is «Hope». Wound of the heart, is also the flip side of desire."

After affirming emphatically, Sky Raker lifted up her face, and looked straight at Haruyuki's eyes from under the white hat.

"Silver Crow. You, above any Burst Linker that appeared, should have most desired to reach the sky in your heart. Your strength of will aiming for the sky created your flight ability, and the wings. Listen... you did not fly because of the wings. It's the opposite. **So that you can fly, you made the wings materialize.**"

"So that I can... fly..."

He muttered that with raspy sound, and repeated that many times in his chest to understand the meaning — then Haruyuki's face under the silver mask distorted, and he sharply shook his head.

"That... is foolish. If just willpower can fly, then... those wings, are something only for looks..."

"Ultimately it is exactly that. Through some kind of phenomenon, the wings that you thought were objects, and «Flight ability» in the system, were robbed. However, the root source of the flight ability, your willpower, has not been robbed. Since to rob that, no matter with what kind of special skill, is impossible.

"Lie... it could not be, that kind of talk!"

Then, he grabbed his knees and deeply hung his head.

"Even if my heart, has the will to fly in the sky, that is just... a trigger. Brain Burst read that, and created those wings and flight ability. Then, in this

world, as I thought that ability itself should be the essence! Unless that... that was taken back, I will, never..."

Holding his hands tight enough to break his fingers, Haruyuki said that in a moan.

For a while, just the sound of wind blowing through at 300 meters above ground echoed in the surrounding. Right in front of his eyes, at the garden's edge extending to the sky, flowers that he did not know the name of swayed, and the petals flew apart without a sound.

"...That is, you want to say something like this?"

Sky Raker's sound that reached him carried by the wind, even after Haruyuki's outburst of anger shout, was calm as usual, no only that, it contained an echo of amusement.

"In this accelerated world, something like willpower is meaningless. Set by the system, only computed numeric data determine different kinds of phenomena."

"...Since, it's like that right. This is inside a VR game. Other than digital data, what else can you say is there."

"This wheelchair."

The sudden unrelated words lured Haruyuki's face up.

"Look carefully. This is not an enhanced armament. Just, as seen, an object made up of chair and wheels. However earlier, you saw that this wheelchair moved by itself right?"

While confused and unable to grasp the real meaning of the question, Haruyuki answered.

"Ye... yea. It has some kind of internal propulsion system right? Like a motor, somewhere."

'—— There must be one. Since, earlier it moved by itself. Probably in her hand a small controller...'

While thinking like that, he extended his neck and stared at the elegant silver vehicle.

And then, his eyes became slits after being hit by a huge shock.

Nothing. Small axle, hub, rim or any motor like parts could not be seen. Then maybe jet propulsion equipment, and looked behind, but a nozzle or anything like that did not exist anywhere.

"Bu, but, since earlier, by itself, it moved."

In front of Haruyuki who muttered in a daze, Sky Raker lightly opened her overlapping thin hands for him to see. Controls or anything like that, there was not any sign of it.

In that posture, the fully stopped avatar riding on the wheelchair ——.

With a 'squeak' wheel sound, slowly backed away.

"...No, no way."

'Squeak, squeak'. The chair moved back more, and on the grass, suddenly spun around. Furthermore, like a figure skater on a sheet of ice, it slid

front, back, left, and right in graceful movements. After finishing a few seconds of dance, the chair stopped at its earlier position without a single inch of difference.

"How was that?"

"How was that... you said."

Trembles shook Haruyuki's shoulders, as his eyes opened to their limits.

—— should not have moved. This world created by the «Brain Burst» program, could be said to pursue reality as if it was another reality itself. Different kind of machines need motive equipment, and the motive equipment must have a source of energy. For example, if it was Ash Roller's bike, there was gasoline in the tank, and the drive wheel was connected to the engine with chains so it could be turned. That was why, when Haruyuki lifted up the rear wheel in that duel, that bike could no longer move. If it was another game, something like the drive system would not matter, and even the front wheel could dash by itself, without a doubt.

That's why, this wheelchair, moving by itself without any drive system sound or jet exhaust light was ——

"Not possible... It should not. Something..., exactly, what kind of power is moving that chair?"

The question that Haruyuki gasped out.

The sky color haired duel avatar, with a graceful smile on her small mask, answered.

"It is Will."

"Wha...!?"

"It was moved with only willpower."

This time he was hit with a shock that almost made his soul leave his body, as Haruyuki shouted many times haltingly like a broken sound file.

"Bu, but. But, but... th, that is, as if. As if... it is movement by will!! Th, that means, that is... «Psychokinesis» ability or something... like that...?"

Here Sky Raker's smile changed to wry smile, and largely shook her head.

"Fufufu, that is not it. This world... Normal Duel Field, or Unlimited Neutral Field, for Burst Linkers that fight in the accelerated world, anyone can have the same power."

"Wha... what!?"

"Please think about it. You could freely fly when you had your wings. Isn't that right?"

"Ye, yes..."

"But, how did you manage to control your wings? Since the real you, did not have experience with using wings or anything like them."

He had not thought about that before, so when asked he blinked in surprise, then Haruyuki involuntarily moved his shoulders as he hesitantly answered.

"Th, that was... moving around the shoulder blade area..."

"If you just did that, then you would not be able to use something like your fist properly during flight, right? Please remember it... even if you are not conscious of it, your will power controlled the flight path. Isn't that right?"

"..."

While speechless, 'Now that you mention it', he thought. Indeed Silver Crow moved both hands around a lot, and without any running start, he could immediately lift off at any place, or stop flying in mid air, and start hovering. At that time, if you want him to say how he was moving his body — he could not answer.

But, he also could not swallow Sky Raker's explanation, so he said while shaking his head slightly.

"Will... power. But, then, that, how is it read? The Neuro Linker having that function... should not..."

After those words left his mouth, inside Haruyuki's ears, he heard an echo of Kuroyukihime's words from her speech.

'—— The Neuro Linker, has the power to access things other than sensory cortex and motor cortex in the brain.'

But that, should be about the earlier talk of «Wound of heart» related conversation. Then he could understand that far. Because he could interpret it as wounds equal to memory. However, how do you convert something ambiguous like «Will power» into data?

“Will, instead of that, would you understand if I say «Image Power»?”

Sky Raker’s voice, made Haruyuki lift up his head suddenly.

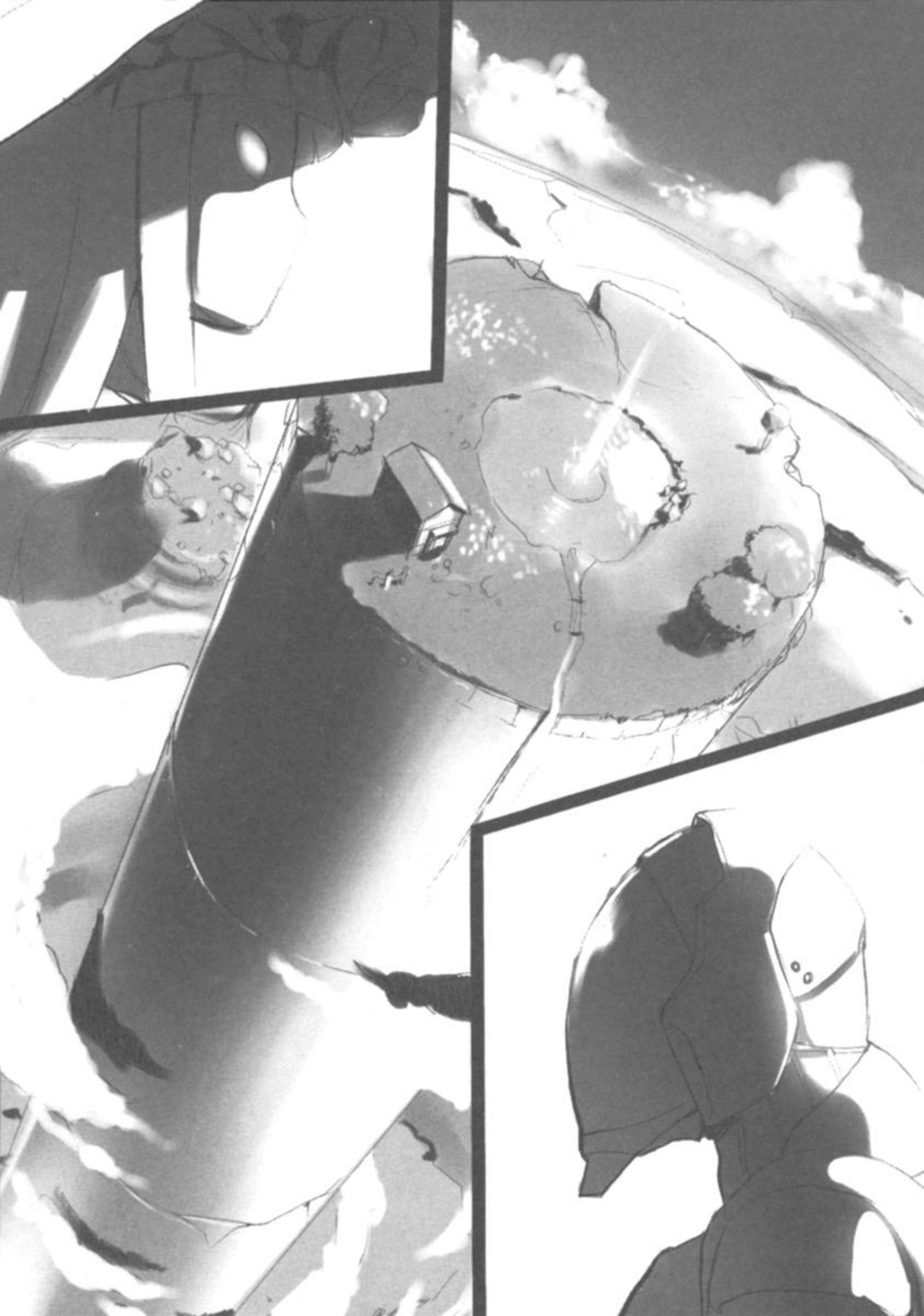
“Image...?”

“That’s right. You can also say it as the power of imagination. From then on, how you wanted to accelerate, turn, and slow down, you should have strongly imagined them during flight. The Neuro Linker read that, and moved your avatar. Listen... Image Power! That is truly, us Burst Linker’s secret true power. This wheelchair, my firm incarnation of the image for these two wheels turning is how it is controlled. I made it move this much, but it required a long time for this... however, it is not impossible. Definitely.”

Again, the right wheel slightly turned with a squeak, then Sky Raker and her wheelchair faced Haruyuki.

Her words that were issued next, somehow contained echo of majestic, mysterious, and divine revelation.

“Hidden inside the normal avatar control of «Action command type», the Burst Linkers who reach the existence of «Image power control type», called this power like this. Will from the mind — that is, mind power^[9].”



A pause.

“«Incarnate^[10] System».”

“Mind... power?”

It was a word he had not heard of in the accelerated world or the real world.

However that echo, had some kind of convincing power feel to it, which Haruyuki repeated many times in his mouth.

What Sky Raker said, he could not understand immediately. Even though the principle of Neuro Linker is a different existence from old era VR machine, and Brain Burst is an unknown super application, still the process of «Changing the dive person’s image to data» or whatever, exactly what kind of mechanism would make that possible.

However, the elegant wheelchair made with silver did not have any propulsion system, but could still show him the dance on the grass. That alone was the truth.

‘—— Accept it.’

Haruyuki closed his eyes tight, and whispered that inside his chest.

It’s circular, but if will —— belief has real power in this world, and if he believe Sky Raker’s words, then he felt that without doubt it would become truth for him.

"That means..., that means."

Something big and hot was stuck in his throat, and Haruyuki with difficulty changed the words ahead.

"If I can use that «Incarnate System», then I, can fly again even without wings... is, is that right?"

He stared at Sky Raker's face as if trying to devour it, as Haruyuki waited for the answer with searing craving.

A few seconds later, the quietly released words, however, was something that was neither confirmation or denial.

"...Earlier, I showed you how I moved the wheels with mind power right? However, even without the difficulty of straining image power, you can do the same thing simply with the use of hands. Listen... using mind power for something that is possible to do with normal control type, and trying to use mind power for the incarnation of a phenomenon that is normally not possible, between them there is a very wide and deep gap... no, a large gorge exists. For example, that is like, in the real world, hitting one bullet with another bullet. It is physically possible, however it is hard to do. Extremely."

Sky Raker looked away from the speechless Haruyuki, and casually looked up in the sky.

And then, there was a serene monologue containing something indescribable.

"I could not do it. Threw away my legs, my friends, and everything else I could thought of, and still could not cut off this world's virtual gravity... Earlier, I said it right. Even if wanting to fly, but could not fly Burst Linker, that was me..."

"Ye... yea..."

After he nodded while drawn in, the sky color avatar extended her supply right hand straight up, and returned the nod.

"Close, but could not reach it... — From the beginning, my avatar had an enhanced armament. The power to leave the ground and get close to sky. However, that was something you can not really call flight. With just a moment of thrust, only about 100 meters high jump, afterward just falling down kind of substitute for flight."

"..."

Without being able to say anything back, Haruyuki just held his breath.

Once long ago, he checked to see how high Silver Crow's flight ability could rise to. The Normal Duel Field's four side «Area» borders were surrounded by half transparent walls, but how would the sky be like, which he wondered.

The result was, even using up a full tank of special skill gauge, Haruyuki's finger could not touch a wall. The height at that time, he remembered it was over three times the height of Shinjuku Metropolitan Government Building seen far away. The recently rebuilt government building, boast a majestic height of 500 meters. That meant, Haruyuki easily rose to a

height of over 1500 meters, and furthermore that was just done out of a whim.

‘—— I, did not even think about the meaning of the power I was given.’

Feeling the same regret that he had while on top of Ash Roller’s bike, Haruyuki shrunk his body even smaller, and Sky Raker’s sound continued to reach his ear.

“...One day, I was taken by the desire to go higher, and fly farther. I used various level up bonus to enhance jump ability, and then was devoted to battles to get more points. The few friends I had, and even my «Parent», became dissatisfied with me and left. Just one person, the master of the legion I belonged to at that time understood, and cooperated with me. I also wanted became her strength, and we fought shoulder to shoulder for a long, long time... —— However, reaching level 8, using that bonus would not be enough to make «Jump» into «Flight», when I realized that... my desire became a deep rooted delusion... no, became madness.”

“Mad... ness.”

Looking momentarily at Haruyuki who whispered that in a raspy sound, Sky Raker showed a very faint smile, and deeply nodded.

“I... in order to make my avatar itself lighter, and to increase flying strength from mind power, determined to throw away my highest attack power, which were my legs. I asked that person who was friend and master to cut them off with her sword. She tried to stop me. However, I

already, no longer even understood how she felt... I threw cruel words at her, however she only made sad faces, and finally granted my wish."

Sky Raker's right hand gently caressed her knee, and calmly concluded.

"Spent all the bonuses, trained mind power, and even threw away legs so that I can no longer walk... after all those, the height limit reached was, 350 meters. 3.5 times of the starting value. However, I could not reach the sky. It barely reached the top of this old Tokyo Tower, then I finally realized it. The wounds of heart that was my avatar's source, my hope and desire, did not have that kind of power. «Raker» means «Someone who overlooks». Momentarily overlooking the sky at the top of a parabola... that was the absolute limit of the power given to me. By the time I realized that, I had already lost everything important to me."

With the shadow of a smile on her mouth, Sky Raker asked Haruyuki.

"How about it, Silver Crow. After listening to words of this fool, do you still want to use «Incarnate System» for flight training? Probably, it would be 99% impossible, with that will you still try?"

"..."

Haruyuki hung his head, and bit his lip.

'—— Could not possibly do it. If it was impossible for this person who reached powerful level 8 Burst Linker rank, then what could the crybaby, coward, and full throttle underdog me do.'

'—— My wings, would not be forever lost even remaining like this. It will be returned after enduring two years. As for Takumu and Kuroyukihime, I would make up some kind of reason for excuse, lie about it, and continue to secretly pay points to Noumi as tribute for two years would be fine. At the time I was bullied by Araya, didn't it go for half a year like that? As for Chiyuri, if I desperately begged her, then she should endure being used as a pet in duel fields. That should be fine, shrink my hands and feet, living just looking down is fine.'

"...For me."

It's impossible.

Haruyuki wanted to answer like that. He wanted to answer, stand up, and turn towards the portal behind to return to the real world.

"...I, for me..."

However, something inside his chest stubbornly resisted, and would not let him say what was ahead. As if, the avatar called Silver Crow itself refused to speak that. Now that he lost the wings, the avatar was just a stickman with needle like limbs and a huge head on top, but it still had something important, as if it wanted to tell Haruyuki that.

He breathed in a lot of cold air into his trembling chest, and held them.

Then Haruyuki said with his head deeply lowered.

"For me, there is still something that I must do. ...I beg you. Please teach me... how to use the «Incarnate System»."

Sky Raker again faintly smiled, and slightly tilted her head.

"It will take a long, long time."

"It doesn't matter."

"More than you imagine right now, probably a lot longer. It might come to, the «Point of No Return» for a Burst Linker."

The meaning of those words, Haruyuki somehow immediately understood.

Haruyuki knew of two Kings — Black King, Black Lotus, and Red King, Scarlet Rain. Those girls' speech and action, had parts far removed from their real world appearance. The reason was, they spent a long time in this Unlimited Neutral Field. So much that a gap was created between their actual age and mental age.

For him also, the time for that choice finally arrived. Haruyuki shuddered, but still took a deep breath, and nodded.

"I understand. ...I beg you, Sky Raker-san."

"Fine then."

With a 'squeak', the wheelchair turned, and the accelerated world's hermit looked at the sky.

"...Right now, the real world time should be just after 9pm. How much longer over there can you keep on diving?"

"Let's see... tomorrow is school day, but three or four more hours should be fine. If necessary, till morning..."

Before, Kuroyukihime warned him that staying in this world for too long would make the real world memory from before the dive fade away. However, he thought there would be no need to worry about that this time. No matter how much time past, he would not forget about Noumi Seiji who robbed his wings. Absolutely, he would not.

"Fine."

Holding the fingers of both hands together, Sky Raker turned back towards Haruyuki.

"So then..., we will rest for today."

"Ye, yes!?"

"Your mind is disturbed by today's happenings. You can not train mind power or anything like that in this state. Since it is already night here, have a good night's sleep, then we will start tomorrow morning. There is plenty of time."

"Go, good sleep... you said."

Haruyuki inquired while dumbfounded.

"Si, since, if you fall asleep during full dive, the Neuro Linker will detect the brain wave and automatically Link Out right?"

"You don't have to worry about that during acceleration. Recently a work was animated by an active high school student that is a famous manga artist right?"

While puzzled by those abrupt words, he still made a small nod.

"Ye... yes. I am a big fan..."

"He is a high level Burst Linker. All of his sleep is taken here, and while going to school is putting out a weekly series, that kind of unreasonable thing is being done."

'What, that natural hitmaker is a Burst Linker? Now that you mention it, there was something like that before.'

While a slight sense of Deja Vu spun around his head, Haruyuki chased after the wheelchair that started moving lightly.

After being invited in, the inside of the white wall and green roof house, was unexpectedly wide.

Even saying so, there was only one room. In there, only a small kitchen, table, and bed was setup.

Sky Raker's wheelchair moved to the cooking stove set at the kitchen side, and took the lid from the pot on top with some clanking sounds. At that moment, a soft nice smell expanded in the house.

While Haruyuki looking on in a daze, she quickly put something like stew in wooden bowls, then with both hands holding dishes, this time the

wheelchair moved to the table. While putting similar wooden spoons beside them, she said to Haruyuki.

"Don't just stand there, how about sitting down?"

"Ah..., ye, yes."

After he unsteadily sat in the high back chair, he looked down at the steaming white stew, and Haruyuki muttered inside his mind.

'No, but, how to say it, here...'

"Is inside a duel fighting game, right..."

After he carelessly said that, Sky Raker nodded with a composed face.

"That is right. Is there a problem?"

"Since, that, eating dinner in a fighting game..."

"Oh, the background of a certain fighting game in the early days, had the gallery eating ramen."

"Th, that might be true but!"

At the same time as he was hit by the feeling of wanting to scratch his head, Haruyuki realized that he was fiercely hungry. Even though he had eaten pizza just a bit ago in the real world, where did this empty stomach feeling come from?

Even that kind of metaphysical question was instantly cleared up when Sky Raker said "Please, eat up", and Haruyuki quickly held the wooden spoon.

And then he hesitated again.

"Ah, bu, but, my, mouth."

Silver Crow's face was covered with a mirror like silver helmet, without any eye, nose, or mouth. However, since Sky Raker urged him to eat with gesture, he hesitantly scooped up some stew, and brought it to his mouth. Then ——.

With a light humming sound, the bottom of his helmet slid just a little upwards. As he used his left hand to touch in amazement, he could definitely feel a mouth inside. Not understanding anything anymore, Haruyuki muttered "Let's eat" and closed his mouth on the spoon.

—— It was delicious.

More natural than any company's VR taste recreation engine, the fine tastes spread in his mouth, then Haruyuki scooped up potato, small onion, and chicken one after another and crammed them into his mouth. As he greedily ate, facing him, Sky Raker who elegantly moved her spoon said with a smile.

"I am happy that you like it, Karasu-san. Please fully taste it while eating. That memory, so that it will be remembered for some time."

"...Yes?"

After emptying the dish without pausing for breath, Haruyuki finally thought about the meaning of those words just now. However, without the time to answer his question, Sky Raker started throwing the dishes

into the kitchen shelves with flicks, so all he could do was bow his head and said 'Thanks for the food'.

When he noticed it, outside the south facing window, it had become completely dark. Probably it was bright around the Odaiba area, and the swaying reflection from the black sea surface could be seen from afar.

Sky Raker's fingers sounded with a snap, and either from house function or «Mind Power» movement, all the curtains closed shut. The wheelchair moved with squeaking sounds to the side of the small bed, then the avatar who lost legs, with just the right hand for support lightly moved her body on top of the sheets.

"So then, it's a bit early, but we should sleep."

What.

Sleep she said.

There was only one bed. There were two avatars. This means — what would this mean?

Haruyuki thought in high speed for an instant, but that was cut apart by the pillow that was thrown to him. Holding that, he thought 'Yea it should be like this what was I thinking I am an idiot idiot this fool'. While cursing himself, Haruyuki lay his silver avatar on top of the floor. Since his whole body was covered with hard metallic armor anyway, whether it was bed or board below would not make much of a difference.

After putting her hat on the hook on the wall, and quickly taking off her one piece and throwing it, Sky Raker lay flat on top of the bed, then snapped her fingers once more. The ceiling lamp and wood stove fire extinguished, then the inside of the house was covered with light blue darkness.

"Good night, Karasu-san."

'—— As expected of her being that Ash Roller's Parent, this person is not someone ordinary.'

While impressed, Haruyuki also answered.

"Go, good night..."

At the same time in his mind, he shouted 'As if I could sleep in this situation!' —— but.

Unexpectedly, at the moment he closed his eyes while shifting to a sleep position beside the table, the base of his head immediately started to be covered with a fluffy white fog. As Sky Raker said, the many happenings were a big drain on him mentally after all.

Of course, he would not forget the humiliation and despair Noumi visited upon him. However right now, while inside this house in this world, he felt that the black things were driven away. Maybe that was, because the inside of his stomach was filled with delicious stew worth cup of happiness feeling, or it might be due to his gluttonous eating of the pretty realistic food.

Resisting the sleepiness that want to close his eyelids with violence like heaviness for a bit, Haruyuki very light whispered.

"Ah, Sky Raker-san. A little, can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

Since he heard that sound immediately, he took a glance towards the bed, and asked while facing the graceful curved silhouette.

"That is... Ash Roller-san, has he already learned the «Incarnate System»?"

"In earnest, not yet. But I just gave hints, and that kid devised various things."

With that answer, he understood something. Ash Roller's new skill of controlling the bike while standing on top seem pretty absurd, but that probably contained image control. He gave a small nod on the floor, and asked the next question.

"Since you are his «Parent», are you also in the Green King's legion now...?"

The reply this time, took a bit of time.

"...No. The legion I belong to, before and from now on, there is only one."

"Then... that is."

While involuntarily lifting up his head, Haruyuki asked the question that he really wanted to.

"The name of that legion is... perhaps, «Nega Nebulas»? And then, the person you asked to cut off your legs is..."

"«Black Lotus». Stronger, more noble, and kinder than anyone, my one and only friend."

The somewhat quiet, yet song like beautiful echo answered, and made Haruyuki nod lightly.

"It would be that... I thought. You... somewhere, towards that person..."

"That is an old story."

As if to cover Haruyuki's words, those short words descended from the bed.

"Long, long ago old story. There... sleep already, Karasu-san. Tomorrow is an early day."

As if to refuse any more conversation, he heard a quick sound of rolling over.

'—— I want to hear more. Of old times, about that person.'

Even with that kind of feeling, however at that time an intense force weighted on Haruyuki's face.

He left his body to the visiting warm darkness, and Haruyuki sank down into the abyss of deep sleep.

The next moment, his head hit the floor with a clank, and he unwillingly opened his eyes.

'What was that, I was still sleeping, who pulled my pillow away', with that thought he lifted his upper body up. Then, through the fully open curtains, the sky with beautiful orange and purple dye made him closed his eyes into slits.

"Whaa... already, morning...!?"

"That is right. Good morning, Silver Crow."

When he moved his face to the sound, he saw the shape of Sky Raker returning the pillow that should have been pulled from under his head to the bed. She was already dressed in her white hat and one piece.

"Go, good morning... Umm, right now, what time is it?"

After his inquiry from greeting, the sky color avatar silently pointed towards the kitchen. The small brass color table clock on the cabinet by the wall, its needles showed it was 5am. If the time he lay down yesterday was soon after sunset, then he calculated that he slept for a full ten hours, seemingly without any dream.

However, for sure his head was refreshed as if being thoroughly washed with cold water. On the other hand, it could be said to be that he did not recall ever waking up this invigorated. Furthermore, no more than 30 something seconds passed in the real world.

"...I see, sleeping here, might be a pretty good use of points..."

After he involuntarily muttered, Sky Raker smiled.

"There is the risk that your head might be cut off while sleeping though."

"...Whaa."

"It's too late to hold your neck now. You did not wake up even after I called you five times."

'—— So that's why she resorted to the roughness of pulling away my pillow'. With that understanding, Haruyuki lowered his shoulders.

"So, sorry. I will wake up properly next time."

However at that point, Sky Raker returned a smile with deep meaning, then drove her wheelchair towards the door.

The Unlimited Neutral Field in the morning, shone a different kind of beauty from the evening. The attribute was still «Wilderness», but the reddish brown rocks in morning sun, seemed like huge ruby gemstones.

The wheelchair moved with squeaking sounds through the grass wet with morning dew, then arrived at the north side bench where their talk last night was, and stopped. Haruyuki went beside her, and this time stood still while waiting for Sky Raker's words.

The original «Nega Nebulas» member, now accelerated world's hermit, and level 8 Burst Linker, took a deep breath, then said with a more strict sound.

"Silver Crow. Then, from now on, you will start the training for «Mind Power»."

"Ye... yes, please take care of me!"

Haruyuki made a deep bow with his head.

Controlling the avatar with image called «Incarnate System», learning that was his only remaining hope. However many days or weeks it takes, he will absolutely learn it.

With that determination burning, Hong Kong made kung-fu movie training scene BGM played in his head, as Haruyuki waited for his first instruction.

—— However.

"...Even saying so, the essence of mind power could be expressed in one word. If that was understood, then anyone can use it."

"...Ye, yes?"

Sky Raker's smoothly continued speech, made his knees bent.

"...Ju, just one...? Is that, secret learned then have full mastery?"

"That's right."

"Please teach me, that."

Naturally, after he said that.

"Fine. However, when you meet me next time, only then."

As if to return that answer, he hurriedly took a step closer.

"N... no, until you teach me, I will not return to the real world!"

"Not met, when we meet, did I not say that? That means..."

There she paused and waved her hand, so Haruyuki took another step closer.

With the sky color hair swaying, the elegant avatar's right hand softly touched Haruyuki's back —.

"Like this."

And pushed him in a horizontal direction.

"Whaa... Oo... oops..."

Haruyuki stumbled on the grass one, two steps.

On his third step, he stepped on air.

"...Wha."

"I wish you good luck, Karasu-san."

The smiling Sky Raker shape, went far away above. To be exact, Haruyuki's body, dropped out of the top of the 300 meters high tower.

"Wha... wai... waa..."

He flapped both hands like wings in panic, but of course that had no effect. Like that, he was pulled by the virtual gravity and free fall straight down —.

"Wa... a... a ——"

Haruyuki died.

Chapter 11

One hour later, he was resurrected.

Death in the Unlimited Neutral Field was very strange indeed. The surrounding scenery changed to a black and white monochrome, his body became transparent like smoke, and could gently move around, but could not go beyond a ten meter radius from the death position.

A small digital number was carved in the center of his view, starting at 60:00:00, and when it became zero, finally the field colors and the avatar body itself was recovered.

While looking down at the pretty big crater he made, Haruyuki said the first thing he thought of.

"...It seems like 100% without doubt that she is Kuroyukihime senpai's friend..."

And then he held both hands at his waist, and looked up at the towering vertical rock wall — old Tokyo tower in front of him.

"...The next meeting, that means... means..."

...Climb to the top. Would be what it meant.

After shaking his head, he sighed deeply. Something like this was said, 'The lion throwing its cub down a bottomless ravine', but that probably should be story about it being a Good Job staying alive after being dropped.

However, unlike the lion, Haruyuki's avatar has two skillfully moveable hands. More than that, his body is as light as possible, and power is as the words said can go through rocks.

"...I will climb."

He whispered as if saying to himself, and Haruyuki held both hands into fists.

Even if it was a 300 meter continuous vertical rock wall, it was not a smooth flat surface like glass. There were numerous gaps where hands and feet could cling to, and it should be possible to dig small holes.

Planning to carve his determination at the beginning, he lowered his waist, and held his right hand at waist level.

"Uryaa!!"

The punch that was thrust out with that psyche, bore a hole deep into the reddish brown rock, and sank in about 20cm deep.

He put his right foot there solidly, lifted his body up, then Haruyuki's left hand held onto a crack a bit higher.

Moving his sight left and right, and after drawing the starting route in his head, he lifted his avatar up with just his left hand. Towards the step he aimed for, this time the tip of his left foot was firmly set.

Actually, climbing like this in the virtual space, was not his first time. Carrying a rifle in jungle and mountainous terrain shooting games, climbing cliffs like this was a worthy strategy for blindsiding the enemy

team. In order to gain that tactical advantage, he even borrowed rock climbing VR training software from the library.

The trick for free climbing is, to precisely imagine the optimal route at the start, and do not stick too close to the surface of the rock.

Looking ahead to the limit of his vision, with where and how to place his four limbs drawn in detail in his thoughts, Haruyuki continued to climb the rock wall in a steady pace.

As if it was a race, the sun that dyed the eastern sky red also inched its position upwards. The color of the morning glow eventually disappeared, and the sky was changed to a eerie yellow.

How many holds he had grabbed onto, he had already forgotten. The top was melted into the sky so it could not be seen, and if he looked down, the ground should be far away. However he did not look towards his feet even once, and while facing the sky, he innocently and honestly challenged the cliff. He was mostly not conscious of it himself, but the concentration that he put to various «Games» like this, was without doubt mostly the only and greatest ability of the person called Arita Haruyuki.

That well-honed nerve, captured the slight shaking of the air from far away. It was a sign of the gusts that was a feature of the Wilderness stage. Immediately, Haruyuki's both hands thrust into the cracks in the rocks and firmly held on, with his body tightly close to the surface.

A few seconds later, the atmosphere shook with a rumble, and a strong gust that was like a giant blowing came attacking Haruyuki as if to shake him off. However, while not even feeling any fear, Haruyuki calmly waited for the wind to stop. Since, the slender and slippery body of Silver Crow without any protrusion should offer no resistance to the wind. That meant Haruyuki believed that he would not be blown away by just wind, and it was actually like that.

The nasty giant finally gave up, and after Haruyuki took a small breath, he again continued the ascent.

At the time that the sun reached straight above, and started leaning slightly west.

Finally, the tip of the rock wall that seemed to continue infinitely, drew a sharp arc in the sky. The tip of that cylinder, was the top where Sky Raker waited.

The distance should still be over 100 meters. However at this pace, he should reach it before night time. Now that he thought about it, Sky Raker's "So that you can remember well the stew's taste" words, and the smile she showed after Haruyuki said that he would wake up properly tomorrow, were probably predictions that Haruyuki could not climb this old Tokyo tower in one day.

'—— I will show you that I can reach the top today!'

With that determination, however with no carelessness, Haruyuki attacked the rock surface using steady movements. The wind gusts that

changed direction in the afternoon, came attacking with increased frequency, but all of them passed by with Haruyuki sticking to the wall.

The sky's color slowly became more saturated, and the climb that started at dawn soon reached nine hours. He was indeed starting to feel tired, and as he ground his teeth in frustration, Haruyuki's nose captured a slight floral scent. Furthermore, the spring's noise, and the faint blue light of the portal also reached his ears and eyes.

Soon. Just 20, no, 15 more meters.

If he finished climbing on his first try, then even Sky Raker should be shocked, so Haruyuki enthusiastically increased his hands and feet speed

——
—— At that time.

Something he had not felt till now, a 'Ring Ring' kind of high resonance sound shook the atmosphere. The echo from unlimited number of bells being sounded from far away at the same time, made Haruyuki lift his face up, and look at the eastern horizon.

And then he groaned.

"Ah... not good..."

Coming into his view, was what came falling down from the sky, the shine of the aura that gently caressed the earth.

It was a «Transition». An ultra large phenomenon that changed the attribute of all of Unlimited Neutral Field.

Haruyuki quickly looked back, and started climbing the wall surface at double the speed he had been going till now. Occasionally his limbs slipped, and he felt a cold sweat, but his fingers grabbed hold of a gap while in danger and held on. Without waiting for his heart to calm down, he again jumped towards his next hold.

As if to hurry Haruyuki on like that, the aura closed in at tremendous speed from the east, and the bell sounds grew louder. The surfaces that were caressed by the seven color light curtain had the reddish brown wilderness colors dispersed in a poof, and was reborn in a new form. That was right, it was **refreshing** this world. After the «Transition», the Enemy that were killed were replaced, and the stage that was destroyed was repaired. There was no Enemy around this tower, but the latter was a problem. If he was caught in the aura, then the holes that Silver Crow's sharp hands thrust into the rock wall, would probably —.

"U... O...!"

Haruyuki shouted, and the final distance were mostly climbed while running on all fours.

However, he was five meters short.

Numerous bell sounds pressed against his ears, and the seven color shine painted all of his view, and in the next instant, Haruyuki's hands and legs were thrown away from the wall with a repulsive force that could not be denied.

"Shitt... Nooo..."

He clawed the air with his hands, trying to get close to the wall once more, but that effort was also in vain.

"Wa... a... a... ——"

Haruyuki died again.

After he was resurrected one hour later, the world was already covered by sunset, and it was no longer the red wilderness.

The ground was made up of properly arranged stone pavement. And then the old Tokyo Tower in front of him was, changed to a bluish black shining metal plate jointed steel tower. It was the «Demonic City» stage.

" ... "

Haruyuki slump down to sit on the hard stone pavement, and gave a deep sigh. If this was a normal game, then at this point he would hit his pillow in his room for distraction, but right now he could not logout, and he did not have the energy for it.

However, for his first try, he almost climbed to the top. Sky Raker seemed to have sounded like this training would take weeks, or at worse even longer. If it was like that, then he could say that he had done pretty well. He strongly held his two fists with, 'I will absolutely climb it next time'.

He really wanted to tackle the wall again right now, but thought that it would not be possible at night. Planning to challenge it again the first thing tomorrow morning, Haruyuki sneaked into a suitable building in the surrounding, and lay down at one side of a safe looking room.

It might be recoil of concentrating for nine hours continuously, he was suddenly attacked by a strong drowsiness, and without the chance to feel hungry, Haruyuki fell straight into sleep.

However, in the third morning of his dive in the Unlimited Neutral Field.

Haruyuki's eyes popped out from sudden shock.

Last night he was careless and did not notice it, but the Demonic City stage's old Tokyo Tower was similar to Sunshine City where he fought Chrome Disaster, both made up of smooth and hard steel plates. Since there were no windows, there were also no ladders. Instead of that, not a single crack where his fingertips could hold onto could be seen. That meant, there was no way for him to climb it.

"...Then, I can just make my own holes."

He muttered, then after knocking on the steel with his fingertip.

Like yesterday, Haruyuki punched using his held fist with all his strength.

And then jumped up as he screamed.

"Ouch... ch ——!"

The sharp pain that was increased two times of the lower field, made him hold his right hand while jumping around, and he stared at the place he hit, but the bluish black wall did not have a single dent. Indestructible object —— that could not be, but probably it was not possible to open a

hole without a heat ray or drill, and of course Silver Crow was not equipped with something like those.

"...Does that mean I have to wait for the next «Transition»..."

He cursed while grinding his teeth, but how many days later would the next aura visit be, and whether the next time will be a destroyable attribute, he had absolutely no idea. The sudden sense of frustration, made Haruyuki slump down to his knees.

That head, was suddenly hit by something with a thump.

"Huh!?"

When he jumped up in consternation, he saw that a white cloth bag was dropped there. He quickly looked up, but the steel color spire extended infinitely into the gray sky, and no one could be seen.

However that bag was dropped by Sky Raker's hand, which Haruyuki had no doubt. He picked it up in amazement, untied the knot, and found out that inside contained a large round bread, and a small piece of paper.

At that moment, he was immediately attacked by a virtual empty stomach feeling, so Haruyuki bit into the large bread as the lower half of his helmet slid up with a hum. It was plain bread with nothing inside, but even so he thought it was somewhat warm, fragrant and incredibly delicious, so he was absorbed in eating.

Soon half of it was gone, then Haruyuki finally turned the paper around, and read the words written there in elegant handwriting.

—— [The mind power training had already started. Yesterday, why were you not blown away by the wind, please think about that.]

"...Huh?"

After reading it once, he could not grasp her intent at all.

This wall climbing, was actually before the «Incarnate System» training, or put another way something like basic training, which Haruyuki understood. Even in Kung Fu movies, before the master taught martial arts, wasn't there a lot of stair climbing?

And then, 'Why were you not blown away by the wind?', that sentence also made no sense. That was because he was holding on tightly, of course. Also, Silver Crow's body has low air resistance. That was why when he stuck to the wall, the wind passed by his back...

"Ah..."

Suddenly, Haruyuki made a small shout. He felt that he was close to something important. While involuntarily chewing the rest of the bread, he again continued to think.

Mind power was, a method of using image power to control avatar or object.

Yesterday, when Haruyuki was sticking to the rock wall while enduring the wind, he did not even think about being blown away. If it was Silver Crow's slender and smooth body, he believed that any kind of wind gust would pass by, and that became the actual case.

Maybe, that was —— at that time, the «Incarnate System» power was already being used? Did strongly drawing the image that the wind would pass through him actually lessen the wind pressure?

In that case, in the same manner, would he be able to deal with this steel wall?

After putting the last piece of bread into his mouth, the helmet closed shut, and Haruyuki stared hard at his right hand.

The five fingers could not be any smaller, nor sharper. And the silver armor gave off a really hard looking shine.

‘—— Not punch, it should be a jab.’

Thinking so naturally, he lined up the five fingers together and extended them straight out. When the wrist was steady, the parts in front of the elbow looked exactly like a sword.

He lowered his waist to half of his height, and this time stared at the wall in front.

The bluish black shining steel plates looked truly tough, however, it was just a stage background. Without any consciousness, it just exists. That meant its physical shape, was only a series of code recorded in the Brain Burst server somewhere.

If he could not even open a hole in such thing, then how could he call himself a dueler. If it was that person, Black King, Black Lotus, then

without doubt she would cut this degree of walls apart like butter without even getting worked up.

He held his fingers extended right hand at waist level. 'Suu, Haa', deep breaths, then one more breath in —.

"...Haa!!"

With that psyche, he thrust straight out.

With a 'Giin!' sharp sound, bluish white sparks flew apart. All of his finger joints, wrist, and elbow had a sharp pain running through them that made his eyes dazzle. The HP gauge in his view's upper left was slightly shaved.

He involuntarily moaned, and Haruyuki slumped down to his knees there, but when he looked up, it certainly existed there. Carved in the smooth wall, was about 1cm long, 1mm deep sharp scar.

'—— It will work!' Right after that thought, he also yelled 'Not enough!'.

His image power was still not enough. He thought of his fingers as fingers and arm as arm, and that was why he was hurt. Think of them as a sword. Similar to that person, a sword that can pierce through various things, and cut them apart.

He stood up, and again sharply extended his fingers. Thinking for a bit, he bent his thumb to the side of the palm, then from elbow to the tip of his middle finger, was made up of a sharp line as if it was designed like that from the beginning.

And then from now on, instead of holding at waist level, held a bit higher to near shoulder level, drawn back to the limit. The left hand held out mostly in front, turned horizontally. Just like the motion he saw from Black Lotus's special skill, «Death By Piercing».

"...Shaa!!"

The sound this time, was somewhat higher and clearer echo compared to the previous one. A lightning like pain again made him ground his teeth, but the scar that the wall sustained was a little bit deeper.

That day eventually ended with him single mindedly continuing to thrust against the wall.

He gradually stopped feeling pain, and by sunset, his fingertip ate in about 3mm, but that was still not at a level that could support him for climbing the wall. However Haruyuki did not feel terribly impatient, and returned to his sleeping place from yesterday while feeling satisfied from the heavy fatigue.

'What I am doing now, might be just some kind of escape.'

He could not help but think like that while laying there. Using «Acceleration» to extend the time, and fast forward his problem with Chiyuri, Takumu, and Noumi was an actual fact. But right now, he was happy while single mindedly concentrate on what he was doing, and it was saving him. Closing his eyes, Haruyuki again slept like the dead.

Morning on the fourth day.

He stood at the same place as yesterday, and stared at the numerous scars carved on the steel wall shining bluish light, as Haruyuki once again thought.

The direction of his image should be correct. His fingertips being hard and sharp, and his arm's thrusting power was being drawn in thought. But, he felt that he was missing something.

While mumbling, he was again directly hit on his head by a cloth bag. Quickly picking it up, he face the sky and shout 'Itadakimasu', then bit into the bread inside.

Today also, came with a piece of message. After opening it excitedly, that was ——.

[Do your best, Karasu-kun ♡].

It was only that, and while embarrassed by the symbol at the end, Haruyuki sighed with a snort. He was expecting a similar hint as yesterday, but nothing else was written.

This would mean, 'I already know all I need to know', it would be like that.

While thinking that, Haruyuki finished eating the bread, and again desperately worked his head.

Mind power. Will from the mind. Image power. Inside his ears, Sky Raker's words replayed.

'——- Listen... Image power! That is truly, us Burst Linker's secret true power.'

Wait... a minute. Something very similar to that was said, long ago... very long ago, by that person also.

At the moment he thought of that, that sound freshly replayed from deep in his memory.

‘—— Listen, Haruyuki-kun. You are fast. You will become faster than anyone else. Faster than me, and the other Kings as well. Speed is truly Burst Linker’s greatest power.’

There was no way he could forget it. That, was right before Kuroyukihime used her final command «Physical Full Burst» to save Haruyuki, the words she left after being prepared for her own death.

Kuroyukihime at that time, should definitely have known about Burst Linker’s hidden «Incarnate System». However, she expressed the greatest power as «Speed» instead of «Image Power». That meant ——

These two, are the same thing.

The word «Speed» that Kuroyukihime used, did not just mean the duel avatar’s movement speed in the field. It was the brain connected to the Neuro Linker, the signal speed sent out by the consciousness. The speed of response between this world and himself. That meant, **how close to the essence of the world**, it would be like that.

“With image... control...”

Muttering, Haruyuki held his right hand up.

Not power. It was speed. What he should image was that. Move to the limit of speed. Get as close to the world as possible. And assimilate with it.

"...Fuu."

With a slight exhale, Haruyuki's right hand thrust out with an image of light.

In fact, a dim but definite white light path floated through the space. A 'Shukiin!' sound, like something from some kind of musical instrument beautifully sounded.

After seeing his fingers buried over 5mm deep in the steel wall, Haruyuki strongly clenched his left hand.

For three more days, Haruyuki continued the same training at that place.

He got up at sunrise, and munched on the round bread thrown down from above his head. The message that accompanied it sometimes had a heart mark, and sometimes did not, but with those words of encouragement as support, he intently continued to repeat left and right jabs.

For Haruyuki's about 14 years of life, he had never experienced concentrating on one thing for this long time.

No, it could be said that this time could not possibly exist in the real world. The real body often get hungry, soon tired, and also had to go to school. In the 1000 times accelerated time flow of the Unlimited Neutral

Field, and then with the duel avatar that doesn't know fatigue that this was a possible action.

The light released by his fingertips, and the depth they ate into the wall, were in a range that he could not feel any increase. However Haruyuki did not doubt that he was doing important training, and while just conscious of the signal speed that his brain sent to the avatar, he repeated the same action 1000s, 10000s, and 100000s time.

Haruyuki felt that this training was not something like «Suddenly true power awaken one day». He realized he was aiming for something that was built up with results that his eyes could not distinguish. Similar to the virtual squash game in Umesato middle school's local net where he continued to gradually challenge the high score. Concentration and accumulation. There was no shortcut other than those.

That's right..., probably Sky Raker who waited at the top of the steel tower also, and standing on the very peak of accelerated world itself, «Red King» Niko and «Black King» Kuroyukihime also, for sure passed through this road.

Right now, he could not even see the shadow of that person walking far ahead in the long, long road, but.

'I too someday..., someday will definitely reach that place, I will show you.'

When the sun set on sixth day, while looking at his right hand with fingers that were fully pierced through the thick steel, Haruyuki strongly decided that inside his chest.

To be able to do the same thing while sticking to the wall, took another half day.

On the day that marked his one week visit to this world, close to noon time.

He glared at the weak sunlight through the thick black clouds, and after thinking for a bit, Haruyuki finally decided to start his second climb. There were only five or six hours till sunset, but he would not need to search for routes or backtrack due to running out of hand holds on the rock in the «Wilderness» stage. If he just climb in a straight line, then it might be possible for him to reach the top before nightfall.

“...All right!”

With a ‘Bang’ hit against both sides of his helmet for psyche, Haruyuki threw out his first thrust.

With a ‘Shukiiiii!’ clear sound and path of white light that was created, his hand sword deeply pierced the wall.

Using his firmly pierced in right hand to hold his body up, this time his left hand attacked a place that was a bit higher.

Speed. Speed of light. He only thought about that.

Eventually, Haruyuki stopped even thinking about the word «Speed». Inside his brain, only the image of sword tip thrusting out like white light existed.

Thrust. Pull his body up. Concentrate. Thrust again.

Since the fingers need to be as horizontal as possible for the piercing, one action only gained him about 30cm of distance. Using that to climb 333m, a simple calculation would give at least 1110 thrusts on the wall.

However Haruyuki just absorbedly, and single mindedly repeated the same actions. Without looking at the top or bottom, forgetting about past and future, so only the wall in front of him and his fingertips became his whole world.

Thrust. Thrust. Pierce. Pierce.

His hands were already releasing a laser like bright light. The depth that his hand sword went in was going deeper and deeper, making it almost difficult to pull them out, but he ignored that and just thrust, and climbed.

Haruyuki went into abnormally deep concentration, even beyond when he was challenging his self made bullet avoidance game. Sight and hearing information lost their meaning, the steel wall also eventually disappeared, and in the darkness that was everywhere, only the flash released by his hands blinked alternately —.

...No.

He could see something.

Far in the darkness, very, very far away, there was a water surface like blue sway.

Portal? There was someone over there. Full of a golden shine, he could only see the silhouette, but for certainly — someone...

Haruyuki wanted to break the dense darkness with his two hand thrusts, to go to that place. He was being called, he felt.

"You are... who...?"

A deep echo accompanied the sound that rang in the darkness, and reacting to that, some kind of reply, no, signal like thing was —.

At that time, a faint vibration was transmitted to his body, and Haruyuki opened his eyes with a snap.

In front of his eyes, was the same bluish black steel wall. The sky was already painted a deep red. Sunset was nearing.

However, a light other than the sun reached him from the east, so Haruyuki looked there. Just then, a seven color aura came falling down from the sky. 'Ring ring' like bell sounds. It was a «Transition».

But this time, Haruyuki did not panic.

Similar to before, he continued to move his hands at a set pace. Even without looking up, he could feel that the top edge was right above. The aura, as if it intended to throw Haruyuki off, closed in at a breakneck speed. Snapping and rumbling sounds of the world being recombined filled the world.

Thrust. Lift up. Thrust. Lift up.

At the same time as the next thrust, his view was covered by the seven color shine.

Flicked away by the fingertip of an invisible giant, Silver Crow's elegant body was instantly blown away into the sky.

The top of the tower that he could soon see went far away. The virtual gravity, licked its lips and extended its hands towards Haruyuki —.

However.

"...Shaa."

With a small exhale, Haruyuki released his final thrust from the air at the wall two meters ahead.

A 'Shuraaaaan!' light sound echoed, the pure white light sword extended, deeply piercing the wall that he should not have been able to reach.

At the same time that he was feeling positive, Haruyuki used that as support, and jumped up with all his strength. After spin turn flying inside the aura, what he landed on with a crunch was —

On top of the sky garden grass that he stepped on about one week ago.

"Welcome back, Karasu-san."

Right above Haruyuki who hung his head while standing on one knee, he heard a soft sound.

While resisting the sudden attack of fierce lethargy, Haruyuki lifted up his head with difficulty.

The sky color avatar sitting on the silver wheelchair, looked down at Haruyuki with a smile.

"You returned much faster than I predicted. As expected of a «Child» selected by her."

In reaction to those words, Haruyuki whispered back an unrelated reply.

"...It should not have reached."

Somehow inside his head, only the feeling of the last thrust he released, was very strongly burned there.

"It was a distance that my short arm absolutely could not reach. ...But, I believed that it would reach... no, I knew that it would reach. If that... that could be said to be «Mind Power», then..."

Here he finally looked into Sky Raker's eyes, and continued.

"That was not something like «Control Power». More... more deeper level... connected to this world... that is to say... to say..."

After searching his vast vocabulary with difficulty, Haruyuki somehow put what he wanted to say into words.

"That is to say, something like «Rewriting the facts»..."

"Yes, exactly."

Sky Raker's smile disappeared, and she crossed the fingers of both hands, then said in a more serious tone.

"«Overwrite». That truly is the one word that is the essence of mind power. However you will not understand it if you heard it as a word. You can only experience it."

"Over... write."

To Haruyuki who repeated that with raspy sound, Sky Raker quietly nodded.

"The Incarnate System, that is the image type control built into the Brain Burst program, was just something for support originally. To support the action command type control, it was just a system to supplement the avatar movement. However, with very fast consciousness, the strongly sent out image exceeded the program constraint, and materialized. The wheels that should not turn, turned, and the arm that should not reach, reached. Firm will, mind power, can overwrite events."

Those words, to Haruyuki who should have already learned the beginning stage of the «Incarnate System», once again filled him with a huge sense of awe.

Half year already passed since he began playing this game, Brain Burst. That's right, this should just be a game. But, in the numerous game titles he had played thus far, did image power... that is the strength of «mind» matter in any of them at all.

'Squeak', the wheelchair moved forward, and stopped right in front of Haruyuki who squat there while being struck by deep emotion.

To the right hand that was held out, Haruyuki hesitantly caught it. He was pulled up with unexpected amount of force, and stood up unsteadily.

Sky Raker removed her hand, smiled once more, then said something he did not expect.

"...With this, I have nothing more to teach you."

"Whatt..."

Swallowing a breath, Haruyuki shook his head sideways many times in reaction.

"Bu, but, I am not yet... finally able to climb the wall only, right! That is far from flying... still, there are many things I need to be taught..."

"Didn't I say it, Karasu-san. That I, could not reach the sky."

After calmly saying so, the sky color avatar also gently shook her head.

"Just maybe, someday you can fly in the sky with just mind power. However, that will probably take a tremendously long time. Even with continued intensive training in this world, for... perhaps ten years."

"Ten..."

Haruyuki was speechless, he ground his inner teeth with a creak — and said.

"Does... doesn't matter. If I can fly again with that, then... I will..."

"You must not."

Suddenly, a harsh sound interrupted what he was going to say.

"Half year, one year, with that amount you can still return. However a person who lives in this world for ten years, can no longer return to reality."

"Whatt..."

"The real world will no longer matter. Quit school, forget friends, and just shut himself in the room, thinking that just this world is good enough. In the Unlimited Neutral Field, there are no small number of such Burst Linkers roaming around. They no longer duel or train, just shut in here to escape from the real world... Silver Crow. Why did you play this game, Brain Burst anyway?"

The sudden question, made Haruyuki slightly hesitate, then he soon took a breath and answered.

"To... to become strong. Gain strength, to reach level 10 together with that person... to clear this game. To know what is ahead, I am..."

"Then, you should not continue to stay here. If you don't return, eventually you will become afraid of this world ending. You will only wish for the continuation of the accelerated world. If you don't want to lose what you are feeling now... please return, to reality."

"Bu, but... I... I."

Moving his head sharply, Haruyuki shouted.

"I want to fly! No... once again, I... have to, fly."

To Haruyuki who slumped down to his knees on the the grass, he was supported by two extended arms.

He was then held tightly to Sky Raker's chest like that, and while all his body froze due to the immense shock, a soft voice whispered near his right ear.

"It's okay. I will give you my wings."

"What..."

"My enhanced armament, «Gale Thruster». The current you should be able to use it... towards the height that I could not reach, you surely should be able to fly there."

For Haruyuki who almost fainted from the plump feeling under the white dress that did not seem to be something from an avatar, he somehow managed to arrange his thoughts and asked in a shaking sound.

"...Wh, why... Why, do you, have to do so much? It, it's a bit late, but... you are Ash Roller's «Parent», he and I are..."

"Friends. Isn't that right?"

The instantly released words, again made him breathless.

"That kid, when he was dueling with you, how he won, or lost, always happily talked to me about it. Having that kind of opponent is a joyful

thing. Even when under different masters. That's why, for that kid, I want you to fly once more."

"..."

After a long, long silence, Haruyuki managed with difficulty to wring out one thing to say.

"...Thank you, very much."

At the same time, even though way too late, how much his attitude in the previous duel with Ash Roller disappointed him — no hurt him, he now found out. There was no way he could put the different feelings swirling around inside his chest to words, so he just repeated the short word again and again.

"Definitely..., definitely, definitely."

"Yes. Definitely, you should be able to overcome that wall. Well... it's time to leave this garden, Karasu-san. The next time, we will meet in the real world."

"Wha... whatt!?"

Lifting his head after hearing some unthinkable words, he saw a smile from the madder red eyes at extreme close range.

"It's a matter of course. In order to give an enhanced armament, either use «Shop» to mediate, or direct connection in reality. If that was sold, it would have a tremendous price, a range that the Burst Points you have would never be able to afford."

"...So, something that valuable..."

"It's fine, that kid would also want to fly again... Place and time, let's see... morning 7am in real time, in front of the Shinjuku station west entrance, the..."

Haruyuki knew about the burger shop that Sky Raker specified, and even though he was dumbfounded by the quick development, he nodded. With that time, there would be plenty of time to make it to school.

"Good. So then..., huh...?"

Releasing the arms that held him, Sky Raker who was going to pull Haruyuki's body up, slightly tilted her head. Her fingertip poked a few times at the center the Silver Crow's back that had lost the wings.

While resisting the ticklish feeling, Haruyuki also tilted his head.

"Ah, is there... something...?"

"No... — Nothing. There, please go."

This time she helped Haruyuki stand up, and Sky Raker on the wheelchair nodded with a smile.

No knowing how to express his gratitude, Haruyuki bowed as deeply as possible, and said with a trembling sound.

"...Thank you very much, Sky Raker-san. The... stew and bread, were delicious."

And then, before she realized that he was crying under the helmet, he turned around behind, carved the sunset of Unlimited Neutral Field's new shape into his deep memory, then jumped straight into the blue swaying portal in that center.

After waking up on his bed in the real world, Haruyuki continued to lay under the sheets for a while.

Eventually he glanced at the clock, the time was still only 9:10pm. Even so, he felt like he had left home for a terribly long time. The memory of the taste of the pizza that he should have eaten before the dive, also completely disappeared.

Just ten minutes — over there only one week passed, he felt this much separation. If that became half year, or one year, what would happen? His mouth tighten strongly, and suddenly a sharp pain came from his right cheek.

He should not have forgotten the reason for that pain.

He said something nasty to Takumu, and that was the wound from being hit.

"...I should apologize..."

While touching his cheek with his fingertip, he muttered. He should properly apologize, so they could once more return to being one and only partners, and take back what was robbed no matter what. His pride, and — also, his wings.

Haruyuki removed his Neuro Linker, set his wake up time on the clock at his bed's top board, then closed his eyes.

At that moment, the fatigue from the tower climb in the other world all came rushing back, and he fell into the abyss of deep sleep like that.

Chapter 12

Haruyuki was one hour earlier than his usual time for going to school, fortunately his mother did not seem to notice.

On the bright April 16th, Tuesday, morning at 6:30am. He said 'I am leaving' to his mother in her bedroom after he obtained the 500 yen charge for his Neuro Linker, then Haruyuki left his home.

As it was said that there are no three days of continuous clear days in spring, under the unsettled looking sky, he walked to the nearby JR Koenji station and got on the central line. He got off at the Shinjuku station after being squeezed by the crowd of unfamiliar people, and left from the west exit, the time was 6:55am.

While moving with a small jog to the fast food shop where meeting was specified at, he suddenly realized it.

—*How, am I going to be able to tell who I am meeting?*

If he could connect his Neuro Linker to the global net, then he could put «Karasu» or some kind of waiting tag over his head, but here was right in the middle of Shinjuku where the Blue King controlled. If he was discovered on the matching list, and that information was spread, then he would be drawn into duels one after another.

And yet, Haruyuki's appearance had no common point at all with his duel avatar. On the other hand, everything was completely opposite. Anyway, way before that, why did he so easily accept the direct meeting, in other

words, letting her know that what was inside of Silver Crow was this pudgy?

The sad memory from before, where he once went to a game related offline meeting was re-awoken, making Haruyuki quickly glance around behind him and think.

...As I thought, I should leave before I am found. And for accepting the enhanced armament, there must be some way to use the shop in the accelerated world...

"Morning, Karasu-san."

"Hiheel!"

From behind, the soft sound and tap on his shoulder, made Haruyuki jump straight up.

While fighting a hard battle trying to retract his head and limbs into his body like a turtle, for 0.3 seconds he seriously thought about answering with "Wrong person", but at the last moment he gave that up and slowly turned around.

Standing on the walkway, an unfamiliar female wearing some kind of high school uniform—— was there, but Haruyuki instantly and intuitively felt that person was Sky Raker.

The long hair style was familiar, and similar to the avatar, the chest was very abundant however that might touch on the harassment code, but it was mainly the atmosphere around the body. Calm and kind, but also not

someone with an ordinary feel to her. The feeling was somewhat similar to what he felt from Kuroyukihime and Red King Niko. She was not riding a wheelchair on this side, but Haruyuki bowed his head with confidence.

"...G-Good morning..."

After the mumbled greeting, he looked up at the opponent's Japanese style eyes and inquired.

"Ah, that is... How, did you know it was me...?"

"With mind power."

"Wha...Whatt!?"

"Joking. There are not many middle school students who stand in front of a fast food shop at this time."

With a light laugh, Sky Raker touched Haruyuki's shoulder, then headed towards the shop entrance. He went through the automatic door after being prompted.

"Karasu-san, how about breakfast?"

"Ah, al-already ate."

"Then, just a drink should be fine?"

After that kind of conversation, he was treated to a medium size Oolong tea without being given a chance to be reserved, then they sat facing each other at a corner table.



While thinking, 'Seeing the real me, what would this person think of me?', at any rate he lowered his head.

"Ah... Tr-Truly, at that time... I was very much in your care... above that, coming all the way here, thank you very much."

"Since my school is in Shibuya, it's not that far away."

With a smile, Sky Raker took out a coiled up XSB cable from her bag that was on the chair beside her. Peeking out from the collar of her sailor uniform, was a Neuro Linker with a white silver color very similar to the wheelchair she used in the accelerated world, which she plugged one terminal into, and held the other end tightly in both hands.

That gesture was not hesitation, however a slight expression from the sorrow of separation appeared on her face. But, at the time a sharp pain went through Haruyuki's chest, that silver plug was already lightly held out in front of him.

In the same shop, the many concentrated stares from students and businessmen was felt by Haruyuki's neck. If it was the middle of night then maybe, but while in broad daylight, and furthermore direct-connecting while in uniform could be said to be somewhat outrageous behavior.

Normally, in this kind of place, furthermore something like direct-connect with a high school girl, would make his heart beat fast, sweat lots, and face all red, but right now was not the time to feel embarrassed.

«Enhanced Armament», furthermore a beginning equipment instead of something bought from a shop, above that they fought and grew together all the way to level 8, how important and beloved that was, he painfully understood now that he had lost his wings. He also knew it was presumptuous of him to think that he could understand that.

However, Haruyuki intuitively felt that something like showing the form of being reserved here would only insult this person. Since this action, should probably be based on the belief of the Burst Linker called Sky Raker.

He bowed his head deeply once, accepted the plug with both hands, then Haruyuki plugged that into his own Neuro Linker.

From Sky Raker's plump lips, the shape of the words 'Burst Link' was slightly motioned.

The process of transferring the enhanced armament in a direct-connection duel, and the lecture on how to use it, was all completed within 1800 seconds.

When he returned to the real world, the time was still 7:15am. While feeling the slight remaining heat and excitement after the direct connection plug was removed, Haruyuki drank all of his Oolong tea in gulps. Sky Raker also emptied her coffee, then while showing Haruyuki a smile in her eyes, stood up.

While feeling exhilaration from gaining the new power, concern about comfortably using that very perky thing, and other feelings, Haruyuki walked to the station following to the left behind of the older girl.

He noticed that sound, when they were about halfway through a long crosswalk.

When the feet in dark brown loafers peeking out from grey tights extended forward to kick off from the ground, a slight—— however certain servo sound hummed. He was drawn back from his musings, and listened for a while with wrinkled eyebrows, then Haruyuki realized it.

They were artificial legs.

Sky Raker's two legs, were electronically controlled artifacts. Connected to the Neuro Linker, motion commands sent from the brain move internal actuators and dampers. It should allow walk and run that would not hamper normal living, but even so, that certainly has limits.

Right after they finished going through the crosswalk, Haruyuki stopped, deeply hung his head, and tightly held both hands.

The reason Sky Raker desired the sky, and wanted wings, was probably not unrelated to these prosthetic legs. Then that motivation, would be a depth that Haruyuki could not even think of, and should be something crazy.

——*Even so, this person.*

—Helped me who lost my wings because I didn't know the reason I was given them... and for encouragement... gave me her own wings. My motivation, was in no way something big. I just wanted to escape the ground where all the bad things happen, that was all.

The inside of his eyes grew hot, and the inside of his nose had some tingling pain, 'I can't cry here', while telling himself that he should not do that, he desperately endured. The height of Sky Raker's pride, compared to any Burst Linker Haruyuki knew—— yes, even compared to Black King, Black Lotus, she would not lose. Thinking of understanding that person's circumstances in his chest, and easily cry, something like that is absolutely not permitted.

While looking straight down, he pinched his right cheek hard to stop what was going to overflow, then the tip of a loafer stepped into his view.

"...You are very kind."

To the considerate words said from above his head, Haruyuki strongly shook his head many times.

"Th...That's not it. Something like that... not it."

After his trembling words with strange guttural sound at the end, Haruyuki again wanted to pinch his cheek with his fingers.

That hand, was caught by the extended white hand, and was strongly pulled to her.

Sky Raker squatted down, held Haruyuki's hand to her chest, and looked straight at him eye to eye.

"Listen, Karasu-san. I definitely did not help you because I pity you, and also understand that you are not pitying me. Those tears, are proof of existence of your truth in the accelerated world."

"Tru..., Truth...?"

After a slight nod, Sky Raker moved her face close to a distance where both of their noses were nearly touching. They were showered by stares from the people who were commuting to the station, but she did not seem to care about that, and said with a secretive yet firm voice.

"People who use «Brain Burst» as a tool to accelerate their thought process for fun in the real world, will definitely not cry like that. For them, «Duel» is just a way to earn points, and the «Accelerated World» is only a hunting ground to trick and trap someone. But for us, we know that those are not everything. Even in that world, we believe there are real encounters, friendship, love, and also bonds. Isn't that right?"

"...Yes. ...Yes."

No longer able to endure it, while his tears fall in drops, Haruyuki deeply nodded.

After wiping the tears from Haruyuki's cheek with her right hand fingertip, Sky Raker continued with a slightly emotionally shaken sound.

"For me, because of my foolishness, my friendship... and bond was lost. The reason she threw herself into an ultra reckless fight against other Kings, was partly due to me, something I deeply regret. But, I do not want you to make the same mistake. I want you to fight to protect what you should really protect."

"..."

Haruyuki closed his eyes tightly, and strongly thought.

—How blessed I am now, even though my wings were robbed, I should not forget them. This time for sure, I should crave them deeply in my mind. The many people I encountered, and bonded with... Ash Roller, Sky Raker, Scarlet Rain, of course Takumu, Chiyuri, and then... Kuroyukihime. Those I should really protect.

"...Yes!"

After another nasal voiced answer, Haruyuki wiped his face and looked up.

"Thank you, very much. I..., will definitely once more, fly with my own power. At that time, I will definitely, come return it... your, wings."

"Yes. Do your best, Karasu-san."

He stood up, bowed to the smiling Sky Raker once, and set off to the station, then Haruyuki stopped. Turning around, he said in a small voice.

"Ah... That is. I, don't think you lost it. That person, for sure, is still waiting right now... for your, return."

When Sky Raker heard that, she opened her eyes wide, then blinked many times.

Eventually, she showed him a slight, but true, smile, to which Haruyuki also awkwardly smiled back, then this time he really started running towards the crowded central line platform.

Chapter 13

When he dove across the Umesato middle school gate, it was just a few seconds before starting of the unforgiving late count.

After checking that his Neuro Linker connected to the school net without penalty, Haruyuki breathed a sigh of relief, and wiped the sweat from his face.

The front courtyard was already mostly empty of students. This time if he could not make it to his classroom within five minutes, then he would be counted as late anyway. He climbed the stairs after being irritated from having to put on his indoor shoes, then flew through the classroom rear door, where his two childhood friends who were already seated turned to look at him.

Chiyuri's eyes look worried, but Takumu's eyes have a pained look in them. Haruyuki returned looks from one of their face to another, bit his lip hard, then quickly went to his seat.

Chiyuri was concerned about Haruyuki being forced into a dangerous position, and Takumu was probably disappointed with Haruyuki for not telling him anything. However to resolve this situation from the foundation, it could only be done if Haruyuki somehow conquer Noumi Seiji/Dusk Taker in a duel.

At this moment, Noumi held «Haruyuki's real information», «Video in front of the shower room», and «Flight ability» three cards. On the other hand, Haruyuki only know about «Noumi's real information».

But if he thought about it, then the Burst Linker's real information is way too lethal, that no matter how many other cards were gathered could not be canceled out. Even in this era, somewhere in the United States and Russia deep sea, nuclear missile submarines swam like ghosts, and similar to that, even one of them could have a huge deterrent effect. For example, if Haruyuki expose Noumi's photo, real name, address, and his duel avatar name in the accelerated world, then Noumi would be same as dead as a Burst Linker. If radical groups willing to do Real Attack go after him, he would probably be bound till all of his points are drained dry. Haruyuki heard that happened in no small numbers of times in the past.

That was why, the «Video» that Noumi recorded with his tricky setup, in the end was a card that could or could not be used due to its power. If he submit that to the school authorities and it reach a point where Haruyuki's school life was destroyed, then he should at least have understood that there is the danger that Haruyuki would expose his «Reality» while in desperation.

That meant, in order to make Haruyuki into «A dog that brings points to munch on», the card that Noumi would use without hesitation would be «Flight Ability» only. But, in order to transfer points, it could only be done in a duel, so if he could win against Dusk Taker even with his wings robbed, then he could resist or possibly even turn it around.

Of course, this decision, would mean that he would have to bid farewell to the silver wings that shone brilliantly on Silver Crow's back until yesterday.

But even that is fine, Haruyuki's heart decided. It was not because he was given new way to fly by Sky Raker. The attachment towards that wing's appearance as an object, was forcing dependence onto his small frame, he finally realized.

'—— I will, defeat Dusk Taker who has my wings.'

'—— And then eventually, without the use of ability or enhanced armament, show that I can fly in the sky with just mind power.'

Holding both hands tightly, Haruyuki declared that to himself.

Right after, the front door opened, and their homeroom teacher Sugeno entered. His tense mood, made the noisy classroom suddenly returned silence.

Before the stand and bow courtesy ended, Sugeno said in a loud voice.

"Everyone, keep standing!"

After the students who were sitting down stood up again with troubled faces, the young Japanese history teacher, with blood vessels appearing on his face under the short hair, again ordered.

"Everyone, look down and close your eyes!"

The air became more dubious, but pushed by Sugeno's threatening attitude, everyone quietly followed the order. Haruyuki's mouth was twisted, but also did as told.

"...Good. Listen like that. Everyone, I think you already know. Yesterday morning, a small camera was discovered in the heated pool girls' shower rooms. Fortunately, it was soon noticed as the students entered, so basically there was no victim, but even so that is something that absolutely cannot be forgiven. Sensei is sad. And then ten times more angry. That there is a student in this Umesato middle school who did such a despicable thing."

'Bang!', the teacher's podium being hit sounded.

"...This time, since there was no victim, this morning's meeting decided that it will be kept to punishment inside the school. That's why, listen... if, the offender is in this second year C class, lift up your head now, and look at sensei. If you give yourself up, then the punishment will be lighter. How about that... is there anyone?"

'—— Are you seriously saying that?'

Haruyuki was appalled while facing down. Even with head down and eyes closed, with just one manipulation of the virtual desktop, the Neuro Linker camera video can easily be displayed inside the eyes. There should be students who were actually doing that right now. Anyway, after angry, despicable and punishment being freely said, who would be crazy enough to confess.

Haruyuki of course did not raise his head, and other students were the same. Sugeno stubbornly made everyone stand for over one minute, but eventually said in a low sound.

"...Alright. This is the final chance. Sensei, will not be so lenient next time."

'That speech sounded like you are certain that the offender is in this classroom.'

He was nervous that Takumu might actually say that — Kuroyukihime would definitely say it — fortunately, he heard "Okay, sit and open your eyes." sound there. After 40 chairs creaked, when it became silent, the teacher said.

"If you are going to confess, do it today. Before the punishment gets more severe."

While that was said, he felt that Sugeno was staring at him intently, so Haruyuki frowned. And then soon, he thought, 'Ah, that's right'. The day before yesterday, on the Sunday that Haruyuki came to school, the log of it should have remained in the school local net. Going to school on a non-school day when he did not belong to any club, must be the reason why Sugeno was suspicious. But with just that degree of evidence, he could not even be called to the student counselling room.

Haruyuki looked away while making a 'I don't know about that' face. Doing so, he saw Chiyuri's eyes who looked at him sidewise. Seeing her deeply scared by fright, Haruyuki this time sighed. Chiyuri had just

became a Burst Linker for a few days. She did not know that there was a huge risk of reality intrusion for Noumi if he actually used that video.

He wanted to tell her «Don't worry» with email, but with Sugeno stubbornly glaring at him, in exchange he just sent a short, but strong look to Chiyuri. She seem to have felt something, and after his childhood friend's mouth moved slightly, she looked back to the front, but the bluish white on her cheeks did not disappear over time.

The morning classes, Haruyuki listened with twice his normal seriousness, and took lots of notes. Since if he drift off even slightly, his consciousness would soon be drawn waveringly towards the direction of his revenge match with Noumi.

However, he had no way to challenge Noumi who used some kind of unknown method to block being registered in the matching list even now. The chance to fight him again, would probably be when Noumi come to «collect» next week's share of points. Anyway, he still have to practice with the ultimate unruly enhanced armament he got from Sky Raker. If he thought like that, then one week is too short.

When attending class seriously, the time was strangely short, so in no time the noon break chime was rang. He looked at Chiyuri and Takumu to see which of them he should talk with for a bit, but Chiyuri was eating lunch with a few girls, and Takumu left the classroom without even looking at Haruyuki.

After a short sigh, as his back lifted up in order to chase after Takumu first, a small message receive icon blinked in the center of his view. Neither an email or voice call, it was a full sensory mode conversation request dialog.

Who would that be, at the moment he looked at the sender's name, Haruyuki crashed down to the chair with a thump. He instantly forgot everything, closed his eyes and whispered the command.

"D, Di, Direct Link."

Due to too much of a rush, his stuttering command was accepted by the Neuro Linker, and Haruyuki's five senses were cut from the real world. The classroom scene was painted by darkness, and he was soon visited by a falling sensation. If he wait like that, then he would land in the Umesato middle school local net's VR space, but before that, Haruyuki extended his hand towards the access gate floating in front of him.

His body was sucked in virtually, and where he was spitted out —.

Under the intense sunlight and could not be any more blue sky, right in the middle of a white sandy beach that stretched everywhere.

He stood up with the pink pig avatar shape, took a few steps towards the shore seen somewhat far away, then Haruyuki noticed that this was not a virtual space made with polygons. There was no sensation of stepping on sand. That meant this was a real world optical image taken with a video camera and projected to Haruyuki's sight as a planar view. The proof for that, was when he looked left and right, the scene did not follow and was

distorted by unnatural perspective. Right behind him was complete darkness.

The conveyed information should be sight and sound only, but strangely he could even feel the hot and dry wind of the southern country, so Haruyuki took a deep breath. Right after that.

"Ya..., long time... maybe not. Three days no see, Haruyuki-kun."

With the familiar, yet never even slightly boring sound echo, a figure appeared smoothly from the right side of his view.

Large straw hat. Thin white parker. The deep black hair on those shoulders, glittered with light as sunlight slid on them.

With both hands behind her, Kuroyukihime who had a slight irritated expression, quickly continued.

"Is there any lag? This is connected through the student council room server to the local net there, so it might be a bit slow."

"N... no, none at all, it's fine. There is no noise either. Ah... that is, Go, good day, Kuroyukihime senpai."

After a bow with his avatar's head, Haruyuki again looked at the shape in front of his eyes.

There was no three dimensional feel due to it being an optical image, however it was not made with polygons, it was the real Kuroyukihime. She went to the trouble of using a camera, to bring the Okinawa scene to Haruyuki as promised.

"Be, beautiful, very. The beach too... ah, also, senpai too."

After he added the end with a very small volume sound, even though Kuroyukihime had half a wry smile, a happy smile appeared on her lips, and she also turned towards the emerald green sea.

"It's the Henoko beach. Just earlier, a military plane that you like so much flew pass."

"Is... Is that so. Wish I could have seen it."

While saying that and other things, Haruyuki's sight nailed down the pure white bare feet extended from the hem of the parker. When Kuroyukihime again turned towards him, he quickly looked up towards the sky and un-naturally said.

"W, ww, weather is fine so that's great! The sky is very blue, just like the «Desert» stage!"

That side should be looking at the camera lense, and should not be able to determine where Haruyuki's eyes were focusing on, but even so Kuroyukihime seemed to have felt something instinctively, and firmly pulled her hem down while her lips became slightly pointed.

—— At that moment.

"Geesh, Hime, how long are you going to be in that shape?"

With that sound, a new figure appeared from the left side of the picture and was framed in. The fluffy haired girl, was a student council member known to Haruyuki. She was wearing a pink one piece swimsuit, that

made Haruyuki's throat tighten in a gulp, but the girl who went around behind Kuroyukihime, suddenly acted unbelievably.

With tremendous sleight of hand, she lowered Kuroyukihime's parker zipper, and pulled it off with both hands.

"Waa, hey, what are you doing!"

"Who was it that went to all the trouble of going with someone to pick swimwear this morning?"

While laughing in a giggle, the female student waved towards the camera.

"Arita-kun, relax and enjoy yourself."

And then quickly framed out from the right side. After that, only left behind Kuroyukihime with bright red face under the straw hat, holding her hands tightly in front of her body.

The swimsuit that appeared from under the released armor, was of course black. Furthermore very small separated one, with close to 90% of the pure white skin exposed. At that point, when he saw bright sunlight reflected from the bulge top of two modest and extremely graceful arcs, Haruyuki felt his heartbeat suddenly rose, and had to take many deep breaths to prevent his Neuro Linker from Linking Out him due to abnormality.

Eventually, Kuroyukihime looked at Haruyuki with upturned eyes, and said.

"...W, well, that is, you know. Since this is Okinawa."



"Th, th, that is right. OOO, Okinawa after all."

He would very much like to press the record button on the side of his view, but doing that during full dive connection would let the opponent know. So without any choice, as the real time video flowed into his brain, he carved them into his memory with his whole body and soul, and Haruyuki desperately moved his mouth.

"Ah, that, err, that... v, very, very much... f, fits you."

"...Th, thank you."

With a slight smile, Kuroyukihime again put her hands behind her back, which he stared at her body naturally, and what pulled back Haruyuki who was going to faint this time was ——.

In the porcelain smooth skin of the lower left side of the abdomen, there was a very faint crosswise small scar.

"...!"

Haruyuki's eyes opened wide for a moment, then he bit down hard on his lips, but since the virtual pain created was way too slight and not enough, he bit down with all his strength.

That scar, was without doubt from half year ago when she suffered near death serious injury after saving Haruyuki from a runaway car. The modern regenerative medicine development should be able to erase most treatment marks, but even that should have a limit. In other words, her wound was that deep.

The reason for the silence seem to have been guessed by Kuroyukihime's perception this time also, and after a slow blink, a gentle smile different from ones till now appeared on her.

With a held up left hand fingertip, she lightly caressed that scar.

"...Normally it could mostly not be seen. Under this strong sunlight, just a little."

Haruyuki could not reply to the quiet sound. With her head lift up, looking straight at the lense — directly at Haruyuki's eyes, Kuroyukihime strongly said with somewhat more firm voice.

"There is no need for you to feel bad. This is my only decoration. Since I was born, the first wound and pain from protecting someone instead of just fighting. And then right now, this scar supports me."

"...Senpai."

Haruyuki somehow was able to whisper that one word, as he tightly held his avatars hands.

'—— I will, never, never, hurt you again.'

He once more confirmed his vow that he repeated many times before inside his chest, but at the same time, he was also aware of a vague sense of guilt.

At this time, if Haruyuki explained the predicament he had recently fallen into, Kuroyukihime would be angry at why he did not tell her immediately, and would probably be hurt again. And then probably, she would make

up some kind of excuse to immediately return from Okinawa, and try to save Haruyuki to the best of her ability.

However, that was exactly why Haruyuki did not tell her. In order to become a knight that can protect Kuroyukihime from any and everything, he felt that right now he has to fight with his own fists.

"...Senpai."

After calling her another time, Haruyuki said as firmly as he possibly could.

"I too..., I too will become stronger. Although up till now I had just been protected... even so, someday definitely, I will become strong enough to support senpai."

"...Un. But, I said it before, slowly is fine. The joy of protecting you, if that was too quickly gone, it would be boring."

Her smile became something mischievous, and Kuroyukihime took a step forward, then lightly slid her hand at Haruyuki's avatar's position.

"It will be gathering time soon, I will contact you again. I will return there on Sunday, so decide what you want for a gift by then."

At the moment that was said, inside Haruyuki head, «Okinawa trip gift» and «Territory battle reward» got mixed up, and the resulting words that came out of his mouth was ——

"Ah, then, th, ththth, thirty centimeter, di, di^[11]..."

"Ha? What? Thirty centimeter diameter... long Sata andagi? Hey hey, no matter what, I don't think that would be for sale... well, I can try to find it..."

'What a glutton'. Being hit what that amazed beam, Haruyuki hurriedly shook his head many times. But sadly, that motion could not be seen over there.

"No... that, that is... — If it exists, it would be nice... The trip, please enjoy it..."

"Un, thank you. Then, see you."

After saying that, Kuroyukihime who reached her hand towards the camera, stopped while muttering "Ah". He immediately raised his head that was hung while downhearted, and while trying hard to resist looking at Kuroyukihime's pure white slender legs, Haruyuki inquired.

"Wh, what's the matter?"

"Come to think of it, Takumu-kun sent me a strange email. About that kendo club's first year student suspected of being a Burst Linker..."

"What."

Swallowing a breath, Haruyuki continued in a rush.

"Email... about what!?"

"Nn, about that... person called Noumi I think, he asked if I could check that first year student's entrance exam point results for each subject, and

I was planning to reply after checking the student database, but did you hear anything from Takumu-kun?"

After she told him that in a secretive voice, Haruyuki opened his mouth with a snap.

"En... entrance exam? Why that data at this time... — No, nothing from Taku..."

"I see... ah, I have to go. Then, disconnecting here. See you."

With a slight wave of her right hand and a flash, the connection from Okinawa was finally cut, and only Haruyuki remained in the dark plane. He soon forgot about Kuroyukihime's ultra high definition swimsuit video, and tried to guess what Takumu was thinking of, but could not come up with anything.

'He might be digging around to gather various data', Haruyuki thought, and after saying to himself, 'But the only choice left is for me to «Duel» with Noumi', then he mouthed the 'Link Out' command.

When he returned to the real world classroom, there was only ten minutes left of the noon recess. He hurriedly stood up to go buy bread from vending machine, and took a glance at Takumu's seat, but he still had not returned. When he looked to Chiyuri next, he saw she was in a rare full dive. After staring at the Neuro Linker on the hung down slender neck for a bit, Haruyuki left the classroom.

'—— Like this, the situation would not change for a week.'

Haruyuki predicted it would be like that. After Noumi said that he would not go after Takumu and Kuroyukihime for a while, he thought that nothing more would happen.

However, Haruyuki was mistaken about his childhood friend's intelligence and action ability, he who had cornered the Black King, Black Lotus. The time when he was forced to realize that, was soon after the contact from Kuroyukihime — Tuesday, 5th period, right before the physical education class ended.

Compared to the girls who were practicing creative dance in the gym, the boys were given instruction for a 3000 meters running measurement that make you feel somewhat of a gap, so Haruyuki went around the schoolyard track while huffing and puffing.

In the center of his view, heartless digital numbers engraved the time. The remaining distance and predicted goal time that he did not want to know, and also from average pitch to heart beat was displayed, so as he looked at the violently shaking heart mark, he was worried if his heart was going to explode like that.

Most of the students had already reached the goal, and only a few extreme cultural type people like Haruyuki remained. The sports club people seemed to have too much remaining energy, so that a few happy go lucky people were even imitating Haruyuki's stumbling form and was running with him on the inside track, 'Shit, you jocks better remember this, one day when I become level 9, I will use Physical Full Burst in the

100 meters measurement to get the world record, then when the track and field club come to scout me, I will say something like “There’s an anime I want to watch” for rejection, serves you right, idiot, idiot’.

While thinking such absurd thoughts, Haruyuki exerted his best spurt on the last straight line.

At that time, he caught a glimpse of the shape of Takumu quietly sitting near the goal line.

His childhood friend was not looking at Haruyuki’s sad flat out run at all. It did not seem to be samurai’s compassion either, towards a point in the air — that meant he was staring deeply at some kind of AR information.

‘What is that guy doing?’, Haruyuki thought as he wiped infinite flowing sweat off his forehead.

Far in his blurred vision, Takumu’s lips opened slightly, seeming about to whisper some kind of command.

Of course, he was not within range to hear the content. However the words that were issued, were the only ones that Haruyuki could read from lip movement, that command. That was —

Burst Link.

‘...That guy Taku, why is he accelerating right now...’

While thinking that, Haruyuki wanted to complete the remaining tens of meters in a full power dash, and put his right foot down.

At that moment.

'—— Vishiiiiiii!!'

With that familiar cold thunder explosion, the ground's color changed. Going through a sense of transparent blue, towards a greenish dull silver. The back of student running ahead, the sports club member beside who teased him, and the PE teacher waiting at the goal line all disappeared.

"Oo... oops... uwaa...!"

Right after, Haruyuki's body was covered by light, and was changed to the white silver duel avatar. After falling forward for a few steps, he controlled the strikingly changed light body movement compared to his real self. After standing up by stepping on the hard ground, Haruyuki leaked out a sound of shock under his helmet.

"Ta... Taku!? Why are you «Dueling» me right now..."

—— Naturally, he thought of it like that. Takumu accelerated, and right after he was also accelerated, so Takumu should had challenged him to a duel through the local net.

However, it was not that.

The flaming words that came up with a rumble as it craved in the center of his view was ——

[A REGISTERED DUEL IS BEGINNING!!]

That was, «A registered for viewing duel has started». Haruyuki was not the dueler. He was a gallery. Since Takumu started a duel with someone, Haruyuki who registered as viewer for his duels was automatically accelerated, and invited to the stage.

In the upper left of his view, the name of the one who started this duel, «Cyan Pile» and his HP bar appeared.

Next, to the upper right, the Burst Linker that was challenged ——

The name «Dusk Taker» appeared.

“Wha...”

Haruyuki gasped. Dusk Taker, that is Noumi Seiji used some unknown method to normally block being registered on the matching list. To challenge him in school, it could only be done like what he was forced on by Noumi the previous day, bind his real body and forcefully direct connect with him, it should be like that.

About thirty meters ahead, the heavy looking indigo and blue avatar stood up. Here he finally looked at Haruyuki, however instead of saying anything, Takumu raised his right hand and motioned him to back off. Anyway, other than «Parent Child» and «Same Legion» gallery, they could not close to within ten meters of the duelers.

Cyan Pile soon looked back to his front side, and the blue light eyes inside the small slits lined on the mask, captured the top part of the school building.

The normal class building, was already changed to a sticky metallic luster biological form. Numerous windows were all replaced with eyeball like black convex glass, and the wall was lined with numerous protrusions that looked like gills with fins and folds. The sky was painted a weird green color, and the wide schoolyard was covered with blood vessel like tubes of wiggly moving metallic tentacles. Without doubt, it was the «Purgatory» stage.

Taking a step away from the metallic insects that were crawling around his feet, Haruyuki again wanted to ask Takumu how he managed this.

However before that, a 'Bushaa' kind of hideous explosion sound loudly echoed in the field.

He looked towards the source of the sound, near the center of the third floor, an eyeball glass around the first year B classroom was shattered from the inside. From the hole in the wall, large amounts of sticky mucus flowed out, and while kicking those aside with his feet, a small shadow bled out from inside the dim darkness.

"...Well well, I expected you to be a more cautious type, Mayuzumi senpai."

With the light youthful voice, the shape that appeared was the blackish purple color duel avatar, Dusk Taker, and as he looked down at Takumu from high above, he slowly shook the blank spherical visor left and right.

"Gather my data little by little, knead trends and countermeasures again and again, and when you eventually move it would be too late..., I wanted to give that kind development to you as a present too."

"I have gathered more than enough data already."

After that blunt retort, Cyan Pile shook his left hand slightly.

"That's why I can pull you out to the duel stage like this right, Noumi?"

"..."

Facing Noumi who leaked out a slight displeased breath, Takumu this time held up his right hand metal pile, then continued.

"Noumi Seiji. The trick that you used to block being registered in the matching list, is regrettably still unknown. But, the moment that wall is canceled, is already possible to be guessed."

"Ca, canceled...!?"

That shout was from Haruyuki. Takumu took a glance at Silver Crow who stood away from him, and at this point he finally talked to Haruyuki.

"Yea. Noumi use acceleration ability in the real world for personal gains. Even for just a practice match in the kendo club. Then, naturally he would use it for other situations. To knock down someone, to finish homework... and of course also, for tests."

"Test..."

At the moment he whispered that, Haruyuki felt he finally realized the reason for Takumu's strange questions that he asked Kuroyukihime.

As if seeing through that, Cyan Pile lightly nodded, then moved his sight towards Noumi above his head.

"At this moment, the first year students are taking their first proficiency test. The fifth period subject, Noumi, is History where you got full marks in the school entrance exam. Of course, with the power of acceleration. ...Except, different from kendo match where you just need to sign in, during the test you need to often transfer data back and forth with the school local net. You cannot be separated from it. That was why I thought, that during this fifth period, you would momentarily contact the local net with Brain Burst, so I waited. And then when using acceleration during a test, naturally it would be just before time expires. Using outside application to check items and gather them up should be better for efficiency. The result is..."

As you saw.

Takumu spread his left hand wide to show it was like that.

Haruyuki who listened while even forgetting to give responses, involuntarily sighed with deep admiration.

At the last moment before the test which he got full marks during entrance exam ended, Noumi would appear on the matching list for one instant. Takumu who arrived at that deduction, continued to accelerate many times while sitting in the schoolyard, and continually checked the list probably.

For Noumi whose action was read precisely, after continuing to be silent for a few more seconds, suddenly shouted brightly.

"Something like History test, what is it anyway! Something that can be instantly understood after searching, don't you think it's totally pointless to answer based only on memorization? Furthermore during test you are connected to the local net, yet only browsing the database is blocked! Makes you think it is some kind of joke!"

While laughing with shoulders shaking, Noumi continued with gradually lowered temperature sound.

"...Mayuzumi senpai, early you said it like this right. 'Acceleration ability being used in the real world for personal gains' ...as if, makes it seem like that is the lowest misdeed. But, I have to say, I don't trust the people who only use Burst Points for duels. In that case, why would it have to be «Brain Burst»? Aren't there mountains of other more cruel, violent, and furthermore painless games around? — After all, you people also think inside your heart that you are the privileged class. One of just 1000 acceleration ability users in the world, different from other slow kids, like that. While clinging to that elite consciousness, and not use the ability for advantage? If that is not hypocrisy and deceit, what else can it be called...?"

"Not particularly, I have no intention of condemning you."

Takumu lightly shook his shoulder, and countered.

"Just a little while ago, I too used acceleration ability to cheat a lot. How to use points, that's personal preference, do as you like. Just, if you are

willing to accept one advice from a senpai, you are getting too many full marks, Noumi. Just inviting useless attention, with no gain at all."

"That is where our opinion differ. For me, anything I can obtain, it is my principle to want the upper limit. Even for just one point in a test, or just one point in a practice match. No... to be precise, it should be call «Rob», Fufu."

Moving his avatar's upper body out from the hole in the wall, Noumi's right hand equipped with the huge cutter, thrust his palm above.

"There is a limit to all things existing in the world. Then, when someone obtain something, at the same time someone lost just the same thing. As though it is a conservation of energy. This world's fundamental principle is a «Contest», senpai. For me, I... love to rob, but above that, cannot tolerate lost, and being robbed. Right now you, are about to rob a maximum of 1.8 seconds of my time. Furthermore, valuable time during a test. In order for that to be forgiven... naturally requires compensation. Of your Burst Points."

"No... it is I, who plan to make you return something you got unfairly, Noumi Seiji. What you robbed from my best friend, his important thing."

At the instant he heard that quiet sound, Haruyuki's body immediately tensed up.

Takumu already knew. That Silver Crow's silver wings, were robbed by Dusk Taker.

A somewhat sad look appeared on Cyan Pile's fierce looking face, and Takumu momentarily looked at Haruyuki.

"...Last night's, your duel in Shibuya, I heard the rumor about it, Haru. Sorry... that I did not notice anything. This time, is my turn to fight."

"Ta... Taku...!"

Hearing Haruyuki's short shout, Takumu held up his left hand thumb to say "Leave it to me".

At that moment, Haruyuki strongly felt his own smallness. Haruyuki who said nasty things to hurt his best friend because he did not want him to know about his lost of wings and power, even so Takumu still wanted to save him. For just that he wrung his intelligence and spent points to make this duel possible.

"Taku..."

While strongly holding his fists tight, Haruyuki felt ashamed of himself for trying to resolve the situation while hiding everything. He even momentarily forgot about the accumulated long training in the Unlimited Neutral Field for that purpose, and Haruyuki released a shout from the bottom of his heart.

"Taku, Win! Not just for me, so that he understand your strength, win!!"

"I will win. For taking back your wings, Haru."

With a nod, Cyan Pile who took a heavy step out, thin blue flames blew up in the area around his right foot and made the air waver.

Dusk Taker who was the target of that spirit, turned his head away as if disgusted, and lowly spat out.

"Aah... please don't make me watch something disgusting. It will give me goosebumps. Seeming to believe in illusion like «Voluntary Friendship», looks like only blissful people can do it with a straight face."

Here, the blackish purple avatar that finally fully appeared from the dark hole, coiled his left hand tentacles around the edge of the hole, and smoothly descended by extending those. After kicking away the metallic insects creeping about the ground and landing, he looked at the much taller than him Cyan Pile from about twenty meters away with upturned eyes. Returning the tentacles released from the school building wall with a whiz, he lightly touched the two curved horns extending from his avatar's back — the folded flying membranes.

"Return what I obtained unfairly? Don't joke with me. Anything I rob once, is forever mine. Until I am bored of it, and don't want it anymore. I am starting to like these wings... so until Arita senpai finish paying the two year loan, I will get the most enjoyment out of it."

Feeling huge rage and disgust in the bottom of his stomach, Haruyuki grounded his inner teeth together.

However before he can say anything back, Takumu's unchanged quiet — but still filled with high heat flame sound whispered.

"No, that's wrong. No matter what, robbed strength will never become your own. Strength is... something you produced, polished, and trained, there are no other way of obtaining it."

"Oh ugh... someone like you, still saying things like that."

While showing the gesture of covering his mouth with his right hand, Noumi taunted.

"Since talking anymore will make me puke, it's about time I accept your points and leave. The test only has five minutes left too."

And then the diminutive avatar lowered his waist a little, and held his hands in front of his faceless mask.

On the other hand, Cyan Pile took an imposing stance like in a kendo match, and only thrust his left hand straight out.

In the upsurge of fighting spirit, Haruyuki took a step back and quickly shouted.

"Ta... Taku, that guy's tentacles can revive even if cut! The right hand cutter also has a lot of cutting power! Also, if you are bound, and get hit with a black beam from the mask, it will rob ability or enhanced armament, be careful!"

Even if it was bad manner for the gallery to give advice to one dueler, but of course in this situation there is no reason to be reserved. Haruyuki's sound, made Noumi give him an irritated glance ——

Right after, Takumu moved.

With a 'Gashuu!' rumble sound, the blue giant flew out at a speed that made him hazy.

Something not possible for a heavy type body, a fierce frontal dash. Furthermore, with no motion. What produced the propulsion force, was the right hand pile driver that poked the ground behind him sometime ago. Using the special attribute of «Purgatory» which made the ground into hard metal, the power of the metal pile that he fired out was changed straight into dash power.

Maybe momentarily caught off guard, the slow to react enemy's face was closed in by Cyan Pile's huge fist with a howl.

Dusk Taker gave up on evading, and took a position to guard with both arms crossed. The punch that still landed coming from above, made the battle's first attack spread out bluish white flashes.

An impact sound like hammer smashed onto iron plate roared, then the diminutive avatar was blown away spinning. It looked like he would crash into the school building behind him like that, but he coiled his left hand tentacles around the protrusions on the ground, and slowly braked as if with a rubber band.

Dusk Taker who landed with one knee on the ground, even though he guarded, his HP bar was cut over 5%, showing Cyan Pile's huge power.

"...Hmm, isn't that very different from that time in kendo? That means that body, represents Mayuzumi senpai's «Lack»? Even though you are that smart and clever, deep in your heart yearn for savage masochism^[12]?"

To Noumi's 'Kuku' ridicule, Takumu no longer said anything. While he reloaded his right hand pile, he carefully closed the distance. Noumi who backed away as if pressed, again continued to spit out words mingled with mockery.

"Or was it, from the avatar's name, the wound itself is the right hand metal skewer? Uun, what would that symbolize? Piercing... penetration... oh, what's the matter? Your eyes are becoming a bit scary...?"

"Stop... stop it, you coward!!"

It was Haruyuki who shouted. If he was not just a gallery, he might have went for a straight line punch.

Duel Avatar, was born from its owner's wound of heart. It was something that any Burst Linker would know.

However, that was exactly why, no matter what kind of opponent, thus far Haruyuki especially avoided bringing out that conversation topic. As for Takumu and Kuroyukihime, he was cautious of even guessing what's inside their heart. To be sure, Cyan Pile's «Pile» should be a representation of some kind of wound that Takumu is holding. However, Takumu is using that openly as a weapon. That would mean, he is continuing to fight with his own wound daily.

"Noumi! You too... your avatar also, is the shape of some kind of «Wound» that you don't want to talk about either!!"

Hearing Haruyuki's sharp words, while Dusk Taker kept facing the front, he sneered with 'Kuku'.

"That's no good, Arita senpai. Didn't I already say it? My wound is «Being Robbed». That means this Dusk Taker has the power to «Rob». It's pretty clear, about the same as your Silver Crow... right!"

The end of that speech, was mixed with air being cut sound.

The three tentacles dangling on the ground flashed snake like, and the thing held in each tip some time ago, were thrown in a direct line towards Takumu. Tiny legs wiggling as they flew through the air, were metallic insects belonging to the geographical effect of the «Purgatory» stage. They were mostly just unpleasant and harmless imitations, but when various kind of them are crushed, different poisons spill out.

The three insects that Noumi threw, were all bright red and green colored. Without taking his eyes off Cyan Pile who was closing in for even an instant, and able to talk to Haruyuki at the same time as he grabbed and threw the poisonous insects, was not a feat that could be done without considerable far-sight.

'...That guy, is unexpectedly familiar with fighting.'

At the time that Haruyuki's eyes opened wide as he thought that, Cyan Pile's left arm moved in reaction to slash away the metallic insects. With egg crunching sounds, the insect shells broke, and poisonous looking mucus was scattered. Different parts of the blue body armor that were showered by the flying liquid gave out white smoke.

"Kuu..."

The HP bar decrease was just a bit, but the unexpected attack made Takumu lean his upper body back. Not letting that moment escape, Dusk Taker's body moved forward like a black lightning bolt.

The tentacles that were extended with a whine, restrained Cyan Pile's pile driver in the blink of an eye. Continuing, the right hand bolt clipper thrust out towards his throat.

His neck is going to be sandwiched — before that was shown, at the last moment Takumu's left hand grabbed one of the cutter blades.

However, the thumb that went between the blades without any choice, did not go unnoticed by Noumi. He instantly pinched that thumb, and as if to extend the pain, gradually munched on it.

"U... Guu."

To Takumu's low moan, Noumi sneered from the low position.

"Aah, didn't your mother teach you not to grab opened scissor blade? See, it becomes like this."

With a 'Bachin!' frightful sound echo, Cyan Pile's left hand thumb danced in the air. His HP gauge was again cut by a gulp, and at the same time his special skills gauge increased with a glop —.

"...You also, did no one tell you that my right hand is not my only attack power?"

Right after saying so with suppressed sound, Takumu tensed up his chest, and shouted.

"—— «Splash Stinger»!!"

With a cutting sound, from staggered holes lined up on Cyan Pile's chest, the face of small missiles poked up, and fired all at once.

Dusk Taker showed impressive reaction, and took a both arms crossed guard stance, but even so he was hit at point blank range with one needle missile after another, and flower of explosions bloomed. While his gauge decreased in gulps, he was blown straight backwards, and this time the blackish purple avatar crashed into the school building, half buried in the metallic wall.

"...Oooo!"

Not letting that chance escape, Takumu started a fierce charge. With the dash that shook the ground, his left shoulder forcefully smashed into Dusk Taker. The school building wall crumpled towards the inside, and the two avatars were thrust inside the school like that. Haruyuki hurried ran, since he could not damage the stage himself, he went in from an entrance a bit far away.

The long first floor hallway, was transformed to a weird shape like the schoolyard. The slits carved in the wall wiggled sinuously, occasionally spitting out steam. From pipe bundle like things sticking out, mucus hung down, and dripped down the hallway in drops.

In that hideous scene, were the shapes of those two that already moved apart. The remaining gauges, Cyan Pile had more than 80%. On the other hand, Dusk Taker's was decreased down to 60%.

"...Noumi, you have already lost."

Takumu's low sound announced.

"...Huh? Is that so?"

"That's right. With your power, you cannot destroy the Purgatory stage walls. The exit is behind me. And then in this narrow space, there is no chance of winning for you as a speed type."

Actually, he thought it was like what Takumu said. Haruyuki himself, had already fought Cyan Pile in a building hallway like this before. At that time he desperately avoided Cyan Pile's attacks, escaped to the roof and somehow found a way to win. However right now, behind Dusk Taker were many dead end hallways.

The two reddish purple eyes made a tiny blink — abruptly, the slender avatar sped forward without any starting motion. Maybe he was doing it for spite of Takumu's first dash, his left hand tentacles had grabbed hold of the wall pole sometime ago, and coiling that threw his body forward.

With his posture lowered to the limit, and not wanting to give up, he planned to slip pass Cyan Pile's feet and escape from the blind alley.

But, Takumu remained calm. His right foot stepped on the floor with a 'Blang!', and created a vibration wave specific to heavy class avatars, that caught Dusk Taker's feet. To the stumbling opponent, his left foot kicked forward to attack. Noumi guarded it, but he was once again blown back towards the depth of the first floor hallway.

Holding his arms out wide to stop anyone passing, Takumu added.

"It's useless, you can't get around behind me. If the fight started inside school, the winner would have been decided earlier. After this, if you don't want me to challenge you during tests, return those wings to Silver Crow. If you do that, then I will at least not interfere with you. So... how about it?"

Noumi who was hit with that condition, while holding his wounded body with his right hand, continued to be silent for a while.

Eventually he took a breath, and said while shaking his head left and right.

"...If it is Mayuzumi senpai, then he would probably keep this idiotic verbal promise with honor. Geesh... in this world, no, in the same school, there are people with this much different sense of values..."

After he spread both hands wide in exasperation, Noumi whispered a short command he had not heard of before.

"«Remove all equipment»."

And then, his left hand tentacles and right hand bolt clipper, melt into space and disappeared. Equipping and removing enhanced armament can be done with voice commands recorded previously in the «Install Menu». Those frank words that were said, were probably keywords chosen by Noumi.

'—— Does that mean, he acknowledge defeat, and plan to return the wings —— that Noumi Seiji would?'

Haruyuki became speechless, and while looking at Takumu like he was going to checkmate in the next move, he was once again impressed.

"Taku..."

'You did it!', when he was going to shout that, at that time —.

Noumi's empty hand and wounded avatar took a low posture. And at the same time causally said.

"Not really, I am not surrendering. Just, with both hands full, I can't use this «Trick», only that."

"...Tri... ck...!?"

To be sure, before also — right before his first duel with Haruyuki ended, he also said that. At that time, Haruyuki thought it was just an insult — does he really, have something else...

At the same time that Haruyuki took a deep breath, Takumu quickly aimed his right hand at the enemy.

"...If you still want to continue, then I won't hold back, Noumi! I will take any chance I have to fight you. And then knock you down. Is that fine with you!!"

The response, was the most calm and no feeling sound up till now.

"...Geesh, I don't like that. Being that serious. I don't want to pronounce the special skill... but, well, I guess there's no choice when it came to this..."

Dusk Taker made a small triangle in front of him with his hands. Continuing, incantation — or curse like words were quietly released.

"...Toru. Eru. Tsukamu. Kezuru. Ubau. Ubau, Ubau, U, Ba, U^[13]..."

An 'iiiiIIIIIN' vibration sound was created, and that soon changed to a high frequency metallic type. And then Haruyuki saw it. Noumi's two hands, were covered by thick blackish purple wave.

It even shook the air in the hallway, with sparks running in a wide range. 'Special Skill!?' He thought that for one instant, but soon canceled it with not that. With this much effect being created, the special skill gauge should be decreasing even before any attacks start. But Noumi's gauge, with over half charge, did not move even slightly.

The logic for this kind of phenomenon appearing other than special skills, Haruyuki only learned of it recently.

That was — image type control. Overwriting events with imagination.

Its other name was —

"Ta.. Taku! Don't worry about me anymore! Defeat him, right now!!"

Haruyuki screamed.

"—— «Lightning Cyan Spike»!!"

After Takumu hesitated for an instant, he sharply shouted.

Cyan Pile's half full special gauge disappeared in one gulp, and at the same time aura like back flare spilled out from the «Pile Driver»'s rear end —.

The air was burned with a 'Shaa!!' sound, and the iron pile that became a ray of light was released towards Dusk Taker.

At that distance, it would be impossible to evade Taku's level 4 special skill — it should had been. However.

'Snap'.

With that dense gas being popped sound, the tip of the shining iron pile stopped without penetrating anything.

What stopped it, were just two fingers.

Dusk Taker's purple wave covered left hand index and middle fingers, held and stopped Cyan Pile's greatest special skill as easily as if it was a cylinder made with paper.

"...Wha..."

Right after Haruyuki's raspy sound leaked out, with the sound of hot metal being dipped into water, the shining light pole itself was sucked into the pulsating wave, and disappeared without a trace.

Lowering his hand listlessly, Noumi lifted up his head slightly, and looked at Cyan Pile who stood while dumbfounded.

Up till now, this would be a scene where words full of insult would be released with suppressed laughter.

But, while Dusk Taker remained silent, the fingers of his both hands were curved to like claws, and producing even stronger purple vibration, kicked the ground.

It was a fearsome high speed dash that made his legs fuzzy. About double the speed of when he used the tentacles earlier. The over ten meters of distance between him and Takumu was closed with less than an eyeblink, and Dusk Taker who came close, his left hand with fingers opened wide drew a large arc from bottom up.

The purple crescent moon carved in the air, cut diagonally across Cyan Pile's thick chest armor. And then, Haruyuki saw something impossible. The blue armor, like clay — no, like pudding, was deeply gouged out.

From the wounds left by the five claws, after one instant of delay, with a 'Splash!', bluish white sparks bundle sprayed out like blood.

"Guu..."

Even though the moaning and leaning back Takumu himself was probably more shocked than Haruyuki, he immediately counter attacked.

Towards Noumi's undefended left flank as his left hand was swung to near his right shoulder, Takumu's thrust out the tip of his piledriver strongly —

'Clank!'

That sound of firing echoed, however, Noumi's body itself was no longer there. After a short teleport like speed right slide to easily evade the pile attack, this time his right hand thrust straight out, and caught the base of the iron pile that was extended the furthest right after firing.

Again, with that strange wet sound echo, the pile was crushed.

No, to be exact, the part grasped by Dusk Taker's purple shining hand instantly disappeared. While showing mirror like smooth cut surface, the iron pile heavily fell to the ground.

'—— So, I was not mistaken.'

It was the «Mind Power Attack». The image from Noumi Seiji's consciousness interfered with the system, and made various objects grasped in his hands disappear. Denial of existence. Overwriting event.

Takumu probably did not know about the existence of the «Incarnate System». While showing shock in his whole body, he still bravely tried to counter attack. Maybe he saw that Noumi's hands can cut various things, he made a big jump to distance himself, then released a kick attack.

It was an awesome right roundhouse kick that seem to burn the air. If hit, even a heavy type avatar would be blown flying.

However that kick, calculated with the avatar weight, plus armor strength, plus muscle parameter, only contained numeric data.

On the other hand, faster than Takumu's kick power reached him through the motion control type system, Noumi overwrote the event with his image type control. The result ——

'Thud'.

With that dreadful sound, the kick was again stopped by only the left hand. The force that should have caused damage, were all swallowed by the purple wave, and canceled. That wet echo, was the sound of Noumi's five fingers stabbing almost all the way into Takumu's right leg shin portion.

"Ua...!"

Takumu's suppressed painful sound leaked out.

As if he was tormenting him, while moving the fingers buried in the leg with wiggles, here Noumi finally released his whisper.

"... Mayuzumi senpai. Earlier, did you say it? Something about me not able to destroy this stage's walls?"

And then, dragging Takumu who was down on his left knee while his right leg was caught, he walked towards the south wall.

Dusk Taker's right hand that was thrust out casually, buried up to his wrist in the Purgatory's metallic wall that shone a metallic green color without making any sound.

Like that, as if pushing aside jelly, a large circle was drawn on the wall.

"Honestly, I did not want this to be seen. Well, even though you would not understand it by just seeing. This skill's logic is known to six... no, seven kings and their aides, and then only **us**, it should be. But, you are a smart guy. After experiencing this much of a difference in power, you should have understood..."

While the words flowed, a close to two meters diameter trench was carved in the wall. With one kick from Noumi, the wall fell inside with a clank, and the outside light shone in.

"That you people no longer have any choice, this means. While I am enrolled in this Umesato middle school, your destiny is determined to be working as my dogs for the remaining school period, this also means."

After finished saying what he wanted, Noumi swung his left hand, and dropped Cyan Pile's huge body out of the hole. Without giving Haruyuki even a single glance, he also moved out to the schoolyard.

The inside of his head was numb, and while Haruyuki shoulders shook in small spasms, he stood in the dim hallway for a while.

'—— Why. Why did that guy like Noumi have «Incarnate System». That should not be something that you could find the existence of by yourself. It should be a technique that could not be learned without being directly guided by someone.'

What pulled Haruyuki back from his stupor, was Takumu's low moan echoed from far away.

Haruyuki quickly lifted his head up, and hurriedly started running. Going through the hole that Noumi opened, and after shivering from the scars carved by fingers while sliding, he also jumped outside.

Almost in the exact center of the wide schoolyard, were the shadows of two intertwined avatars.

However they were not fighting. That should already be called one sided ravage.

Cyan Pile who was spraying large amount of sparks from his chest and left leg wounds, even had trouble standing. Even so he still continued to bravely attack with both hands, without even scratching Dusk Taker. The dusk colored avatar avoided the punches with dance like jumps, while his claws carved shallow scraps from the opponent's armor.

Cyan Pile's HP gauge was cut to only 20% left. With his broken pile driver machine not fixed, the special skill gauge that was gained shone empty.

"Ta... Taku..."

Haruyuki wrung out a broken sound.

What he should say to his best friend who was not giving up under overwhelming disadvantage, he could not find the words for it. Probably against Noumi's mind power attack that could erase objects including physical attacks, the pure «Close Range Blue» Cyan Pile would not have the skill to counter it.



After tens of wounds was carved on his mask, Cyan Pile eventually fell down to his knees.

In the normal duel field, the pain created by damage was half of unlimited field, but even so, if many small wounds added up, the total amount was not something that can be endured. Noumi without doubt went after that, and deliberately repeated small attacks.

Takumu who was trying to stand up again while resisting the virtual pain torturing his nerves, was kicked by Noumi with full force fell rolling.

Dusk Taker's small foot stepped firmly right on top of the fallen Cyan Pile's mask.

"500 seconds remaining huh. ...Well, you did better than I thought, Mayuzumi senpai. You have more talent here than kendo."

After a 'Fufufu' laugh, Noumi raised his right hand claw high. The cyclic, concentric circle of purple wave increased in strength.

"So then, I will take the payment for robbing 1.3 second of my real time. From your Burst Point, pain, and then humiliation."

On Takumu's throat, that right hand was going to thrust in, right before that ——.

"Wait, Noumi!!"

From as close distance as a viewer was allowed, Haruyuki yelled.

To Dusk Taker who stopped his hand, and glanced at him with his round visor, Haruyuki continued to desperately throw his voice.

"Wait... if it's points I will give you mine! In order to fight with you, Taku used up a lot of points! I still have extra, so if you want to rob, take it from mine!!"

Half of it was his true feelings.

— However, the other half, was Haruyuki's plan to bet on a slight chance.

He suddenly kneeled down there, pushing the face of his helmet onto the ground crawling with insects, and Haruyuki said with a sound close to crying.

"As you see, I beg you, Noumi!!"

Kneeling down on the ground ungracefully, was of course his first time in the accelerated world, but that was not so in the real world.

Last year, before he met with Brain Burst, Haruyuki suffered terrible bullying from three boys in his class. Whenever possible he was extorted buns and juice, and when he did not have the money to buy it, they forced him to apologize by kneeling on the ground like this. They were humiliating memories that he did not want to remember, but right at this moment, he use all those times' desperate sound and manner to continue strongly rubbing his head on the ground.

"...Uwaa, that's the worse. The worse in many ways, Arita senpai."

Noumi's appalled sound echoed.

"Going that far for something like friendship is a sickness, are you still a Brain Burst owner? Not acting like that in the duel field, even I feel that way."

"...You can think whatever you like. I will of course pay next week's points as well, please... I beg you!!"

"Yea, yea, I understand. Somehow, you remind me of the pill bug that I was teasing in my courtyard when I was a child. But well, I acquired flying ability from this person as well..."

In the sound filled with large dose of disgust, he heard the sound of Noumi's foot leaving Takumu's face. Next, he felt that Noumi was manipulating the install menu through the HP bar.

Then, with a sharp warning sound, a window showed up in his view. It was a confirmation dialog for changing this field from one on one «Normal Duel Mode» to gallery included «Battle Royal Mode».

Haruyuki lifted his head up slightly, then after looking at Noumi who was shaking his head in exasperation, and Takumu who was still fallen, immediately pressed the YES button.

With that, if Takumu also consented, then the mode will be changed to where Haruyuki will be a dueler instead of gallery. That's right, without waiting for next week, he would be able to fight Dusk Taker.

However, although it was expected, Takumu did not press the button for a while. Naturally, Takumu also should have believed Haruyuki's words at their face value, so having his points that was going to be taken away shouldered by someone else, was not something that his pride would allow.

From a position above ground where the standing Noumi barely could not see him, Haruyuki stared at Takumu with all the power he could put into his two eyes.

'—— Press it.'

'—— I have not given up yet. I want to fight him. I have to fight him. That's why, press the button, Takumu!!'

The scream in Haruyuki's brain, might have actually reached him.

Takumu's eyes inside his damaged mask opened wide for a moment, then lifted up his shaking arm —— and touched a point in the air.

After a few silence filled seconds, suddenly the various data display in his view vanished. Right after, with a 'Glop!' sound, Silver Crow's HP gauge extended in the upper left corner. The right side gauge remained empty, but above Cyan Pile and Dusk Taker's head, a fully recovered gauge floated. With the remaining time under 400 seconds, the flame words [FIGHT!] floated up, and blew apart.

'...Finally.'

While kneeling, Haruyuki whispered inside his chest.

Finally, this moment arrived. The rematch with Noumi Seiji / Dusk Taker. To take back the many things he was robbed, it was a fight that he must not lose.

With 'Clomp clomp' sounds of the metallic schoolyard being stepped on, the dusk avatar approached. Taking on the green light raining down from sky, that shape shone a strange color. Maybe he was still maintaining his mind power, since waves of emptiness dripped from both of his hands.

While he was crouching down, Haruyuki silently moved his right hand to his chest, folding his thumb inside the palm, with the remaining four fingers lined straight.

'My arm is a sword. No matter how hard the armor is, even if it was empty darkness, it will pierce through anything, a light sword.'

At the same time as he held that firm image, he felt intense heat being created at his fingertips.

The footsteps approached. Cold air stroke the back of his neck.

Stopped right in front of him. One foot was lifted up, casually stepping towards Haruyuki's head ——

"...Shii!!"

With a short psyche, Haruyuki's left hand caught the foot that was going to step on him, and while being pulled up by that, he extended his right hand straight out at the same time.

"...Ku!?"

Even while leaking a short sound, Noumi showed fearsome reaction speed, and used his left hand to block Haruyuki's thrust.

A strange 'Kyuaaan!!' sound echoed throughout the field. Haruyuki's right hand fingertips that became a pure white sword, was swallowed by Noumi's left hand five fingers claw. However, neither of them touch each other. The white and purple, light and emptiness auras clashed, releasing a high pitched resonance sound.

"...Whatt ...this, skill is...!? You dog... when did you, this kind of trick...!!"

Noumi snarled, and the purple wave's power increased. The imagination of darkness that erase various kind of existences fed into the system, trying to cut off Haruyuki's hand.

Against that, Haruyuki resisted with the image of a laser that can pierce through various kind of existences.

Speed. Light speed.

'...That's right. You, are faster than anyone.'

At the moment that he felt he heard that faint sound, Haruyuki shouted.

"Hardship... Pass, throughhh!!"

Like thousand of icicles breaking apart, a huge, and also fleetingly clear sound filled the battle ground.

With a slicing sound, Haruyuki's right hand sword that extended over one meter all at once, pierced through the darkness created by Noumi's left hand, and blew it apart without a sound. Right afterward.

Dusk Taker's left arm itself, from palm to shoulder, shattered all at once from the inside out.

"Kuo..."

Noumi was largely bent backwards while spraying out large quantities of reddish purple sparks, as Haruyuki released Noumi's left leg, he continued by thrusting out his left hand.

"Oooo!"

The attack that was aimed for the center of the chest, however was regrettably deflected upwards by the enemy's right arm, and was stopped leaving a cut on that armor. Noumi back dashed with fierce speed, and stopped with two legs spreaded wide.

There was a chance for followup attack, but Haruyuki did not chase after him. Maybe he wrung his image too strongly, so that white fireworks flicker and blinked in his view. After shaking his head many times to make those go away, and opened his eyes wide, Noumi had already taken a cautious posture.

"...Hee, e..."

From under the blank spherical visor, a mocking but hoarse sound leaked out.

"No way, mind power attack huh... That meant, all night yesterday, you went on a training in the mountain huh, Arita senpai."

"It didn't even take one night though."

After the quiet answer, Haruyuki also stood up. With his both hand fingers lined up, white light and vibration sound remained.

"Fuun? I heard of you losing indecently to some small fly in the blue legion though. I was worried if you could earn the quota points properly, but instead of that, you have enough energy to bite back huh. I had not foreseen this."

After the 'Kuku' sneer, Noumi shook his right hand quickly, and the purple wave that was there was blew away.

"...What, already out of energy?"

"Hahaha, no way!!"

After the bright sound shout — Noumi moved his right hand once more. As if to cut across in front of his body, his hand was raised high to the upper left.

"I also, was not just... sleeping!!"

With that sound, he pulled and wrung his arm.

At the same time as that movement, the horn that was extended from his back, opened wide left and right with a rustle.

Five shafts of bone on each. Those were connected by thin membranes. The devil's wing — flight ability robbed from Silver Crow.

In front of Haruyuki who was involuntarily breathless, the wings were extended high, and was strongly flapped once.

Right after, with a 'Thump!' of air shaking, Dusk Taker's body flew up in a straight line.

There was not a single fragment of the awkwardness from the previous day, that was spectacular flying. Soon after reaching a lot higher than the school roof, he turned his body around and started hovering.

'—— No, I can't be shocked by something like this.'

Haruyuki bit his lip, and said that to himself. Noumi was someone who can use the «Incarnate System». And then, the flight ability control is the same image control type. Then it would be easy for him to get the hang of it.

From the ominous silhouette carved in the green sky, a singing like sound came pouring down.

"...Actually, this is a great thing, these wings! Having this one sided advantage, but still only level 4! But well, with only those short limbs for weapons, Arita senpai can't do anything about it... Don't worry, I am different! Way better than senpai, I will use this power properly... like this!"

Cutting his words off, Noumi extended his right hand straight out, and sang out in low volume.

"Equipe «Pyro Dealer»."

The system that accepted the voice command, started materializing new enhanced armament on Dusk Taker's right arm, which Haruyuki looked on while standing still.

What was created, was a huge equipment that covered the whole arm. Many pipes extent to the elbow from the large tank like object carried on the shoulder, and connected all the way to the back of the hand where the firing mechanism was.

'—— Long range firepower!'

Haruyuki's inner teeth bit down, and all of his nerves tensed.

0.5 seconds later, casually like children playing with fireworks, flames spew from Noumi's short looking gun barrel.

Those were as words said, flames of fire. Not bullet or beam, just like fantasy type game dragon blew out breath attack kind of high density flames, poured down from far above with a roar.

He did not have the time to be doubtful about how to counter it. Right after Haruyuki dashed forward on reaction, an explosion sounded behind him, and an intense feeling of heat hit his whole back.

"Kuu..."

While that leaked out from his clenched teeth, he desperately ran. Even with random snake runs, explosions of flame soon chased after him.

Sparks of fire bounced around the surroundings, and his HP bar was cut by a few dots.

After running west along the walls of the school building for close to ten seconds, the explosion sounds finally cut off. As he turned around while the bottom of his feet slid on the ground, Haruyuki looked on in awe.

In the center of the wide school courtyard, an about five meters diameter crimson lake was form. From there small rivers snake around as they extended, and all the way to right in front of Haruyuki, bubbling liquid metal flowed.

The new enhanced armament that Dusk Taker called out, was clearly a flamethrower. Furthermore, it could create terrifyingly high heat. If he was directly hit by it once, then the ground under his feet would melt and movement would be almost impossible, which would leave him just burning there.

Haruyuki looked from the shining red pool, to Cyan Pile who was crouched down nearby. After the duel mode was changed, his HP gauge was fully recovered, which also healed all his outer wounds, but it seemed like the shock from full body pain had not left him yet. It would take at least one minute before he could join in the fight.

"Fu... Fufufu."

A few tens of meters above Haruyuki who was thinking in high speed, Dusk Taker's innocent laughter sounded.

"As I thought, the combination of «Flight Ability» and «Long Range Firepower» is awesome. While hovering high in the air like this, I can recharge my special skills gauge with field destruction bonus. True perpetual motion... to say it bluntly, I am invincible."

And then the flamethrower was once more turned towards him, and towards this avatar that was truly a «Flame Demon» right now, Haruyuki threw his suppressed voice.

"...About that. Your invincibility, is missing just one necessary condition."

"Oh? What kind?"

"That is, those who can fly... is not only you!!"

Cutting off his speech, Haruyuki raised both hands high, and at that moment, prayed inside his chest.

'—— Sky Raker-san. My, other master. Right now, I will use it...'

'Your, wings!!'

"Equip!! «Gale Thruster» ——!!"

The voice command echoed high above.

Dusk Taker stopped still.

And then, from the sky, two ribbons of sky colored lights came raining down. Those scored directly on Haruyuki's back, and concentrated ——.

A large, powerful, and beautiful object was created.

An 80cm in length, about 10cm in width, streamlined booster. Two of those were lined up on his back. The tip a thin cone, the rear a square exhaust, surrounded by a total of four extended small horizontal and vertical stabilizers. That meant instead of calling them boosters, it was the same as him carrying two miniature cruise missiles.

This, was the enhanced armament that caused Sky Raker to be called «ICBM» and «Astro».

Staring at the enemy that seemed to leak feeling of shock, Haruyuki lowered his waist in one go.

The boosters groaned with 'Hiiiiin' sound. The ground at his feet shone bluish white reflection.

'...Heart's desire for sky. That is the true fuel for «Gale Thruster».'

In his ears, sounds from far away again replayed.

'...There, go on. Since it is you, should be able to fly again, Karasu-san.'

"O... Ooo!!"

Haruyuki roared, and kicked the ground with all his strength.

A huge impact sound shook the atmosphere, and the surroundings were filled with bright light.

Right after, Haruyuki flew towards the sky with tremendous speed. That speed, was easily over the silver wings straight lift off speed.

Dusk Taker's black silhouette came closer and closer. However at the same time, Haruyuki's senses also started accelerating, slowing down the subjective approaching speed.

"Wha..."

With leaking of a small sound of shock, Dusk Taker's right arm flamethrower was pointing towards Haruyuki.

Right before red light came out of that muzzle.

"...Raaa!!"

With that psyche, Haruyuki's left spear hand thrust out.

The sharp fingertips covered by shining white aura, touched the muzzle, and cut it from top to bottom — reaching all the way to the fuel tank on the shoulder.

With a 'Shugoo!' howl sound, the two avatars crossed, then separated. Haruyuki who continued to dance higher in the sky, saw a crimson flash below his feet, and then heard an explosive echo that seemed to chase after that.

He opened his folded arms and legs, and stopped the rise. When he looked down, he saw the familiar Umesato middle school H shape building, the wide grounds, and then the shape of Dusk Taker who floated with those as background.

After the total lost his left arm, his right arm also showed deep damage. The flamethrower was all blown apart, and from his shoulder to elbow

was burned deep black. His armor that had shone like amethyst also had cracks running through it, with bright sparks dripping one after another. His HP gauge also, was cut by half.

As Haruyuki controlled his descend path with his two hands opened wide, he head towards the edge of the school yard, where originally a grounds lighting tower was, he landed on top of a portal lined with strange eyeballs.

Different from the wings that was robbed from him, the «Gale Thruster»'s flight did not use up the special skills gauge. However, same as Takumu's «Piledriver», an instant of firing used up all the energy, and required a long time to recharge.

While checking the new third gauge on his view's upper left was starting to slowly increase, Haruyuki held his two hand knives at ready.

In contrast, Noumi also waved his damaged right hand. The curved claws, were once again covered by purple waves.

"...I see, I see. You still had that kind of card hidden huh."

The sound that drifted by, was flat due to shock and anger, but still seem to contain an echo of sneer in it.

"Hey, please tell me, Arita senpai. How and where did you pick up that enhanced armament? You don't have the points to buy it from a shop right? ...Ah, is it like this, you forced its owner to un-install and robbed it, isn't that right? That is cruel, even I would not go that far."

To Noumi who was laughing 'Kukukuku' with his throat, Haruyuki calmly responded.

"You would not understand, Noumi."

"...What did you say?"

"The wish of this person who created this sky colored «Wings», and the feelings of entrusting that to me, even if I tell you, you would definitely not understand. For you who think of the accelerated world as just a means. And then... that you, do not have the qualification to be called a Burst Linker!!"

The right hand filled with white shine, was thrust by Haruyuki directly at Noumi.

The dusk colored avatar, continued to be silent for a while.

Eventually, with a tilt of his head — he said.

"I heard that before, that speech. «Burst Linker»? ...When, have I used those words?"

"...What?"

"Hey, senpai. Do you know? Burst Linker, is a **self calling** started by the first Brain Burst owners. No matter where you search in the system, those words will not be used. That's why we will never use it."

"We...?"

Before he had time to think about the meaning of that word, Noumi strongly spit out.

"The properly way of calling, should be Acceleration Ability Owner... no, «Acceleration User». Use the given privilege to the maximum degree, take whatever your hand can grab. That should be the form that you and me should become. So... about time we settle this. I and senpai, whose mind power — that is, «Desire», is stronger!!"

With a 'vroom' moaning sound, Noumi's right hand scattered intense waves.

"...Mind power is not desire. It is «Wish»!!"

Haruyuki also shouted, and gathered light swords on both hands.

At the same time, from every part of his body, he gathered all the feelings of hope and seeking for the sky. He filled his chest with clear sky blue, and directed that flow to the boosters on his back.

This was the true goal of why Sky Raker had Haruyuki train the Incarnate System. Originally, after the «Gale Thruster» fired once, it could not be used to jump in a short time, but that energy could be charged by mind power. If that was possible, then this booster would no longer be a simple jump support equipment. It will become real wings that is capable of continuous flight.

The exhausted third gauge, fully charged all at once.

From Haruyuki's back, bluish white flames sprayed out.



Noumi's black wings were extended to the limit.

Right after, both of them, trailing silver and purple trajectories in the sky, attacked at maximum speed.

"Oooooo!!"

With a psyche from the bottom of his stomach, Haruyuki's left hand sword thrust out at light speed.

"Chieeee!!"

With blade like spirit, Noumi's right hand claws swung down.

A 'Gakiyuuun!!' kind of impact sound echoed, shaking the sky. Two color flashes swirled, tangled up, then exploded —.

Two arms, both torn at the middle, blew apart.

"Not ye... yettt!!"

With a roar, Haruyuki continued with his right hand sword, thrusting it at the center of Noumi's chest.

The arm that became a blinding ray of light, pierced through the blackish purple armor without a sound, burying all the way up to his shoulder.

However at the same time, Noumi's right foot that was covered by waves of emptiness, sandwiched itself around Haruyuki's left flank. The HP bar of both, dropped by 30% all at once.

While enduring sharp pain that might burn out the core of his head, Haruyuki wrung out all his remaining mind power, right below —

towards the grounds of Umesato middle school and opened his boosters all the way.

The two avatars that were locked together, dropped down like a shooting star trailing flames. The hard ground, came closer and closer.

They would crash like that, even with about the same HP bar remaining, Silver Crow no longer had any remaining power of flight.

Maybe his intuition told him that, Dusk Taker's body curved up, taking a defensive position.

However Haruyuki lifted up his head, with his eyes remaining open, he made the final adjustment to their falling trajectory ——

And shouted.

"Taku, now ——!!"

"Whatt..."

Noumi gasped, and right in the center of his face that was quickly lifted up,

A bolt of lightning charged in from the ground, Takumu's special skill —— «Lightning Cyan Spike» arrived.

With that attack as a break, Haruyuki did not miss the timing of when the falling speed dropped, and after pulling out his right arm from Dusk Taker's chest, he turned his body 180 degrees, then fired all the energy remaining in his boosters.

Even with that, at the moment when his two feet touched the ground, many cracks opened up on the white silver armor, and sparks were sprayed out. The ground was also cracked radially, and he collapsed to his knees in the center.

One second later, tracing the remaining flashing trajectory in the sky, Dusk Taker fell down on a place a few meters away.

From the look of him, it was a mystery that he still had HP gauge remaining. His both arms were lost, and a huge hole was opened up in his chest armor. His ball like face visor had spiderweb cracks, and the center was a black on black hole pierced through, with crackling sparks welling up.

Maybe he still had the will to move, as the tip of the wings that lay flat on the ground shook, but that could never flap the wings.

‘...It is finished.’

Haruyuki whispered that inside his chest. As for Dusk Taker, one attack of any kind on him later will probably determine the battle at that time.

However Haruyuki remained crouched down and stationary, as he waited for the footsteps slowly approaching from behind.

Eventually standing beside him was Takumu — Cyan Pile’s awful shape. Most of his body was burned black, with smoke rising up.

However that, was not from anyone’s attack. It was from his own damage. Dragging the avatar that could not move too well due to the remains of

painful sensation, he sank himself half way into the magma pool created by Dusk Taker's flamethrower. For at least one attack, to gain the gauge required to release his special skill.

Haruyuki did not know about that because he saw it. If he looked at Takumu even once during the fight, then Noumi would notice that intent, and would see through Takumu's plan. That was why, Haruyuki never looked down from the sky. He just believed. That if it was Takumu, he would definitely do that.

"...Noumi."

Haruyuki quietly spoke to the out of power dusk color avatar.

"The reason you lost, was not because of my «Mind power attack» or «Gale Thruster». It is that we are not one person. And then that is, also the reason why you cannot win against us from now on."

There was no answer.

After looking up at his comrade beside him, Haruyuki made a small and strong nod.

Takumu also returned the nod, then held out his burnt left hand. Haruyuki held it with his right hand, and stood up with that support.

The remaining time was down to two minutes. In order to add the final attack on Dusk Taker, Haruyuki moved forward one, two steps.

'...Rin.'

It was at that time when he felt he heard that faint sound.

Stopping still, Haruyuki quickly looked left and right.

No one was there. There should not be anyone. This field was not created in the Global Net, it was made through the Umesato middle school's local net. That was why, there should not be anymore Burst Linker appearing

——

'Chirin.'

Again, this time for sure, a clear, however somehow sad sound echoed.

Haruyuki and Takumu turned at the same time towards the source of the sound —— and looked up at the sky.

In the Purgatory field's green colored sky, there was not even any kind of shadow. However in the next moment, Haruyuki caught a small movement in the edge of his view.

It was not the sky. It was on the roof of the school building standing on the south side. Over there, surrounded by spear sharp cast iron fence, far fresher than the color of the sky, shining green like a peridot, was a small avatar ——

"Wha..."

That whisper, was it from himself, or Takumu, Haruyuki did not know.

That was, that avatar was.

«Lime Bell».

That is Chiyuri, Kurashima Chiyuri. However, why? Chiyuri should still had not registered Silver Crow or Cyan Pile for automatic gallery.

"Chi..."

Haruyuki tried to call out with his raspy sound.

However as if to avoid that, Chiyuri's left hand equipped large bell was lifted towards the sky.

He felt that he heard a voice. Riding on the breeze in the stage, very faint, instead of sound, it was something that could only be quietly felt ——

'...Sorry, Ta-kun. ...Sorry, Haru.'

And then, the yellowish green avatar, swung the left hand bell. At the same time, voiced the special skill name.

"...«Citron Call»."

The echo of the bell ringing sound was incredibly beautiful, however maybe due to the stage sound effect interfering, it was heard as somewhat distorted.

The emerald drops that glitter as they rain down from the roof —— covered the almost dead Dusk Taker.

Haruyuki and Takumu, could only look on as the deep wounds carved on the blackish purple armor, all started repairing from the tip.

"Wh... y?"

Haruyuki heard from his own throat, the cracked and crushed sound.

"Why... Chiyu?"

Author's Notes

It's been a long time, or it might be nice to meet you, I am Kawahara Reki. Thank you very much for reading "Accel World 3 Dusk Robber".

This Accel World series is based on the style of a «VR Fighting Game Novel», but it could not be strictly said to be a game novel, which I think many felt it after reading the first volume.

Since the presented game system, is sometimes transcended by vague things like «Spirit» or «Miracle». Those are things that should not be in a game novel, and I also 'try to avoid that kind of development!' from the bottom of my heart (laugh), however after writing, it somehow became like that.

That was probably because, the question of 'Is winning according to the system really winning?' might have remained inside me for a long time. When one side used scissors in rock-paper-scissors, the other side won with rock... 'is that really okay?', something like that. If it was the hero (or the rival), then he should be able to win with paper (laugh).

Yes, 'I know that I am saying something unreasonable!', so here, I tried a system that could tear that apart, and this was the thing called «Incarnate System» that debuted this volume. That is, imagination and willpower will basically become an element of win or lose in the game, and doing this unreasonable thing is ultra messy, but could this story continue to be a game novel, or that it might be visited by even more chaos... 'everyone please look after it while your patience capacity lasts!' I think!

Just that, thinking about it, of the many systems in the real world, the only thing that can become the energy to exceed the common sense framework is imagination. Inside the world are walls wherever you look making you sigh, but imagination will always allow you to fly pass those. So I write nice things wrapped in smoke and take the easy way out.

While new characters debut, illustrator HIMA-san who was greatly trouble with designs for real and avatar, and editor Miki-san focused a lot on me as I was as usual similar to the hero Haruyuki-kun who was facing backwards to the limit, both of whom I am very much in debt to this time also.

And then for you who read to the very last, you have as much thanks as my mind power can materialize!

2009 July 23rd, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ network term, sending out a packet of info to check net connectivity issues such as traffic speed, reliability, and distance.
2. ↑ game term, weakening effects
3. ↑ all three are pork related Okinawa dishes
4. ↑ Sata andagi— sweet deep fried buns of dough similar to doughnuts
5. ↑ 征二 - the 2nd character 二 means two or second. People with names like that usually have an older brother with the kanji 一 (one or first) in the name.
6. ↑ 氏 - general name calling term that could mean Mr. or related.
7. ↑ Japan, so this is km/h.
8. ↑ Karasu is 鴉 in Japanese, which means Crow or Raven. Normally Silver Crow is spelled as シルバー・クロウ. I will use Karasu when the kanji word is used to differentiate between them.
9. ↑ Spelled as 心意 in Japanese, a combination of 心 (heart/mind) and 意 (intent, will).
10. ↑ Also spelled as 心意, with Incarnate in katakana beside the word, which I will use just 'mind power' normally. Unless it has system to go with it.

11. ↑ I think he wanted to say 30cm direct connect, but I have to match what Kuroyukihime heard in the next line.
12. ↑ The way this word is spelled - マチズム (Machizumu) might be an insult to Takumu's name Mayuzumi.
13. ↑ I can only make out a word or two of these: Tsukamu might be catch or acquire, Kezuru = cut, and Ubau should be rob.

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